

**urban blind fields**  
creative public reclamations

by  
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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary criticism of the North American urban public realm has reached an unproductive state of exhaustion. For some time, it has painted a rather bleak portrait of public space attributed to the impacts of global private economic forces, the disintegration of traditional civic ideals and an increasing uncertainty in its ideal (or even relevant) spatial form. If a productive and meaningful dialogue about the public realm and architecture's contribution to it is to emerge, a more complete definition of this realm must include the impacts of its informal others.

This research-based thesis examines the city's spaces and actors of *hidden* appearance as a contribution to that expanded definition. In so doing, it finds a more appropriate means for their description in what Henri Lefebvre terms the *urban blind field*. Just as the human eye's blind spot is subjective, the urban blind field too is dynamic and shifting. Looking from multiple viewpoints is necessary to the blind field's exposure and more genuine portrayal.

The research centres around a series of blind fields encountered during field research undertaken across Toronto, Canada. Each is reconceived and foregrounded through participant actions upon them, rather than by professional design alone. Three fundamental urban acts — *play*, *exchange* and *cultivation* — serve as a loose framework for the theoretical, photographic and discursive explorations thereof.

This thesis asserts that blind fields possess within them the seeds of active urban democracy — challenging contemporary criticism's bleak claims. Therefore, their maintenance is paramount to a rich and active ongoing public realm. As a relational concept, the blind field also exposes a fertile means of reconsidering architectural praxis and its relationship to space, material, time and participatory hierarchies.

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EXTERNAL READER:	George Baird
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Many thanks to my family and friends who provided hours of enriching conversation, delicious meals, ways back to sanity and countless unexpected opportunities to *play*, *exchange* and *cultivate* for the better part of the last eight years. Jessica, our conversations and your translations made an invaluable contribution to the work.. Matt, my best friend, toughest critic and loving partner, thank you for continuing to be all these things and more with grace and patience.

Finally, to the urban actors who made this research possible, I am deeply indebted to you for allowing me glimpses into your worlds — knowingly or not.



## DEDICATION

to my family



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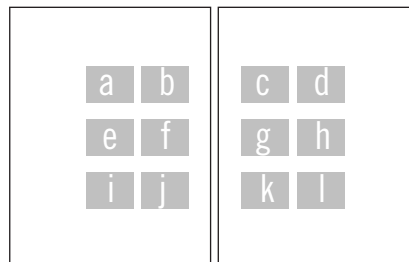
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PG	FIG	DESCRIPTION + REFERENCE
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<b>8.0</b>	<b>URBAN[ITE] - URBAN[IST]</b>	
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177	fig 8.1	Playing cricket along the Jane and Finch Hydro corridor photo take by Carrie Hunter
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*fig 1.1     Edge of the Bellevue Community  
Pool reclaimed by residents as a community  
garden*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*On the ground, shifting the gaze, it began.*

Walking, encountering, bearing witness to a city's conflicting and at times hidden publics: this thesis examines and engages a range of informal public spaces across the urban landscape. It claims that spatial appropriation through at times unconventional uses thereof bears witness to diverse, active and creative urban actors. These spaces and uses contribute to a richer reading of public space's value and meaning in the contemporary urban city. The research appropriates and expands upon Henri Lefebvre's concept of the *blind field*, in order to more appropriately present the conflicting and dynamic nature of urban space's production and experience. The spatial and operational *blind fields* which urban actors tap into and reveal are approached and categorized by the implicit actions they take, all while revealing more complex intentions.

The thesis research examines both international and local projects to this end. However, the more developed cases of each action were to be found in Toronto, Canada, as the city presents a confluence of several historical, physical, social and cultural conditions which attract and deter informal public space and use. In encountering Toronto, I aspired to learn how to look with fresh eyes in places that rested in a *blind field* between my own understanding of Toronto as an urbanist and urbanite.

Though often overlooked or misread, *blind fields* should be of contemporary relevance to designers, urbanists and architects — even though they are unable to claim full design authority over them. As a challenge to the professional understanding of authorship of architectural space, blind fields provide a fresh and more complex voice in the existing critical dialogue on public space.

The following briefly outlines the components of the thesis and their structures:

Part 1, **Public**, explores the shift in thinking about formal and informal conceptions of public space and action — beyond those institutionalized and critically acclaimed or vilified. Returning to and expanding on Arendt's conception of *vita activa*, I examine how these spaces and practices — and the research about them — contribute to broadening a contemporary and complex reading of public(s). In the increasingly fragmented and heterotopic constructed landscape of the city, this section explores the latent potential of the *blind field* to act as a temporary other to popular and expected definitions of space and use. A second chapter on the informal nature of spatial production lays the groundwork for a theoretical exploration of the roles these ephemeral *blind fields* play in their ongoing reproduction.

The three chapters in Part 2 examine three primary **Actions** integral to the existence and maintenance of urban society: Play, Exchange and Cultivation. Each has its own latent ability to *transgress* formal boundaries, *expose* cultural differences in spatial use and *expand* perceived use value of the *blind field*. Drawings, photographic and discursive study derived from both theoretical research and encounters comprise the investigations central part of the thesis.

The third and final Part, **Reactions**, discusses both the limitations and the expanded possibilities of design's contribution to the blind field. It identifies and reflects upon valuable operative measures and, speculates on a set of critical spatial practices which expand design agency by straddling the margins between use, critical activism, art and architecture. The final chapter renews architecture's agency in the ongoing public space dialogue, reflecting on the roles of both urbanites and urbanists in the blind field's maintenance across the constructed urban landscape.

public

“the newly public realm I am attempting to imagine for our time will not be an altogether conscious construct.... and its formation will disclose evidence of many an engaged hand in the process of its fabrication.

To be sure, within its tentatively demarcated territory, no protagonist is going to be able to claim authenticity unquestionably for himself... Indeed, following Arendt, we may say that as architects, we will not be able to see altogether clearly the consequences of these efforts of our own, but will be able to rest confident that they will ‘appear clearly and unmistakably to others.’ ”

GEORGE BAIRD  
*The Space of Appearance*, 1995

## 2.0 FOR[U]M

“For all the importance and power of recent ‘end of public space’ arguments, what makes a space public...is often not its preordained ‘publicness.’ Rather, it is when, to fulfill a pressing need, some group or another *takes* space and through its actions *makes* it public.”<sup>1</sup>

DON MITCHELL





*fig 2.1 The student protests of May 1968 in Paris — subverting the street's cobblestones into material of protest*

## SITUATING SPACES OF APPEARANCE

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt critiques the rise of the social as the simultaneous demise of the public. Arendt presents a model of public space rooted firmly in the tradition of Greek democracy, and replicated formally and typologically in the form of the Athenian *agora*. The *agora*, the civic square where free men meet, act and appear to others, is therefore the ideal and formal model for democratic civic space in much of the Western world. In addition, this space must be based on a conception of physical permanence, for “if the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men.”<sup>2</sup>

For Arendt, such a space is held above all others as “the *space of appearance* in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as they appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.”<sup>3</sup> Arendt clearly situates *oikos*, the private and somewhat hidden world of the home, in direct binary opposition to the *agora*, the political public sphere, or the *space of appearance*. Unlike the private space of the home and the space of work or labour, public space is that which brings man into collective, *common* existence. It is the space of action. Despite doubting the modern-age viability of a single, permanent public realm, Arendt seems to valorize quite adamantly the recovery of a singular institutionalized sphere.<sup>4</sup> While some critics, such as Craig Calhoun, point out that this concept of public space has since been challenged, the act

of striving continuously for such an ideal maintains an argument that makes for an impossible recovery.<sup>5</sup>

Jürgen Habermas promotes an even greater singularity in ideals and participation of the public. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas develops a concept of the ‘public sphere’ emerging in eighteenth century Europe. The conception of public space he proposes is largely based on early modern European bourgeois spaces — a space that is theatrical, institutionalized and ultimately limited to a liberal bourgeois conception of public (the café, the French Salon, the book shop). This conception does not, as political and social theorist Nancy Fraser states, entirely “serve the needs of critical theory today.”<sup>6</sup> Primarily, Habermas’ tying of the notion of the ‘public sphere’ to the state — giving primacy, even more so than Arendt, to a concept of a singular institutionalized public sphere — proves difficult to hold true and viable. Fraser, critical of such a singular, bourgeois sphere, favours what she refers to as a post-bourgeois conception of public space, arguing that “the idea of an egalitarian, multicultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics.”<sup>7</sup> She also notes that, since well before the late nineteenth century, there have been many competing publics outside the realm of the bourgeois.<sup>8</sup>

The common spaces that Habermas and Arendt discuss, that favour action and speech, serve civil order and hope to replicate patterns of civil behaviour



fig 2.2 Greek agora — the quintessential public civic space and form



in their very design. They separate social from civil space from each other.<sup>9</sup> In practice, however, the edges between such realms aren't so clear. For Habermas, public space is where men do not partake in discussion of private, individual or subjective concern, but instead come together to speak only of objective matters of collective interest in a rational vein.<sup>10</sup> Habermas' model heavily prioritizes rationality and impersonality as the basis of any meaningful public. However, objective discourse does not seem a likely product of any actual-lived public, which is far more nuanced given that the nature of participation involves the ability to speak one's mind.<sup>11</sup> An expanded conception of a public, contemporary space of action must blur the lines between public and civil society, in contrast to the idealized split that both Habermas and Arendt promote. Given this ever-increasing blurring between state, family, market and society,<sup>12</sup> spaces produced by their overlap must inform future public engagement in our contemporary public sphere.

Another ideal means of conceptualizing the public sphere comes from the sociological school, as seen in the work of Richard Sennett. As an extension of Arendt's and Habermas' work, the sociological approach tends to remove itself from the rational debate and instead focuses on 'self-dramatization' as the basis of a shared public realm.<sup>13</sup> Sennett argues for a realm considerate of two primary concerns. First, it is a realm based on the *teatro mundi* model, where public space is that where differences meet and play out with the help of the 'masks' one wears whenever engaged with others. However, in more recent writings, Sennett acknowledges the shortcomings of such 'theatrical models' in practice, as the

fig 2.3 A Parisian Street Cafe (1930s)

fig 2.4 A Parisian Arcade

idealized model “failed to address...what a liberated politics is — what is a liberating theatricality in the city and what is a repressive one?”<sup>14</sup> Second, and complementary to the *teatro mundi* model, lies the realm of disorder — crucial to the ‘civilization’ of individuals.<sup>15</sup> Disorder, according to Sennett, is a state that only the public realm of strangers (in opposition to that of family, friends or ‘community’) can provide.

In his seminal work, *Fall of Public Man*, Sennett laments the privatization of public man due in large part to the rise of the automobile. Because of the automobile’s effect on the urban landscape and the increasing de-stimulation and isolation man has induced, one no longer needs to face disorder, and can therefore avoid it entirely. Public man moves from a space of active participant in the ‘play’ to a mere docile spectator. Much existing architectural and urban critical theory has taken a stance that a democratic public space is all but gone, or has morphed into shapes that maintain certain formal characteristics. Any space of *action* has deteriorated, replaced by a caricature of itself, or a simulacrum of something that may never have existed in the first place.<sup>16</sup>

Michael Sorkin’s edited works *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, compile many arguments to a similar end as Sennett. Sorkin situates three particular characteristics of this ‘new city and new public space.’ The first is the “dissipation of all stable relations to local physical and cultural geography, the loosening of ties to any specific space.”<sup>17</sup> Due to globalization, he argues, we have lost a sense of place.



fig 2.5 Disneyland’s ‘Main Street USA’ — the main ‘public axis’ in this themed Utopian city (California)

fig 2.6 Disneyland Europe’s ‘Parisian Arcades’

The second characteristic is one that Mike Davis elaborates on in his essay *Fortress Los Angeles: The militarization of public space*. Davis argues that state obsession with security and rising levels of manipulation and surveillance over its citizens has proliferated new modes of segregation.<sup>18</sup> Both through design (formal and technological) and policing, the rise of enclave communities, gentrification, and general sterilization of public space pervades the work.

Third, Sorkin identifies this new city as “a city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park”<sup>19</sup> in which (post-modern) architecture relies on historical imagery and urban design is preoccupied with reproduction, “the creation of urban disguises.”<sup>20</sup> Following Margaret Crawford, Sorkin points out that most institutionalized public space is, in fact, a hybridized version of Disneyland — the most carefully crafted of utopian ideals — reminding us that “[in] the ‘public’ spaces of the theme park or the shopping mall, speech itself is restricted: *there are no demonstrations in Disneyland*. The effort to reclaim the city is the struggle of democracy itself.”<sup>21</sup> Not only do such statements proclaim an end with only a nostalgic return as both problem and solution, but they seem to confine the concept of ‘public’ to an institutionalized realm.

Despite Sorkin’s warnings of a “happy regulated vision of pleasure,” or Davis’ claims that Los Angeles has extinguished its last real public spaces,<sup>22</sup> assumptions that such spaces are the sole substitute for a democratic public realm (and have wiped out ‘the public’) present a limited argument, and tend to be presented in a similar rhetorical fashion to the fear-mongering they aim to criticize.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this leaves us with a nostalgic longing for “a city based

on physical proximity and free movement,"<sup>24</sup> incorporating a variety of marketable and valued formal typologies, within which is wound up a mythical sense of 'community,' the likes of which New Urbanist developments are ready to package and deliver to a public that is all too eager to consume.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, such criticisms seem biased in their assumptions that the increasing governance of such spaces inevitably means that certain practices will end when they are stopped from occurring in public space. While this thesis agrees with the position that certain instances of increased governance are detrimental to 'public' space, it believes that the people who partake in these practices are finding other forms and means of expression amidst the urban landscape. One simply has to look more carefully.

## DESTABILIZING TRADITIONAL FORMS & DISCOURSES

Landscape theorist J.B. Jackson also identifies the shift in public man and the role of a unified public sphere but provides a more positive spin, claiming a mere evolution or relocation rather than an end. Through his writing on North American public spaces, Jackson states that “we no longer know how to use the traditional public space and that we need a wide choice of very different kinds of public space.” According to Jackson, these spaces are numerous and varied — “spaces where people come together spontaneously and without restraint.”<sup>26</sup> Despite Jackson’s identifying of such practices in the mid-1980s, as sociologist Sophie Watson points out, “there has been a striking paucity of studies of the mundane and commonplace spaces of the city where people simply muddle through or rub along, living and performing their differences, and even delighting in them.”<sup>27</sup>



*fig 2.7 A market offering local vendors an opportunity to sell food, plants and second-hand goods every Sunday morning in a commuter parking lot. The sanctioned appropriation of this space has occurred every year from May to October for the past 20 years, and expanded based on community needs. Such additions include booths for local food product makers and spaces for affordable second hand goods.*

*fig 2.8 Dancing in a parking lot in Brooklyn on a Sunday afternoon*

Watson presents a fragmented account of marginal public spaces in order to focus in greater detail on their dynamic and volatile quality. Her studies of more ‘heterotopic’ spaces such as public bathing sites and the publics of children and the elderly “destabilize dominant, sometimes simplistic, universalized accounts and help us reimagine urban public space as a site of potentiality, difference and enchanted encounters.”<sup>28</sup> She describes “sites of magical encounters, hidden in the interstices of the planned and monumental...the micro-publics of social contact and encounter which provide us with an understanding of ethnicity and other identities too, as a mobile and incomplete process.”<sup>29</sup> Watson exposes both



the limits and potential 'enchantments' that public space can provide, all the while focusing on a plurality of spaces that allow for a plurality of publics. She strives for *agonistic encounters* which are, for Watson, the "inevitable and productive outcome of difference in the city where these are engaged in with openness and lack of closure, where imbalances of power are acknowledged and addressed, and where outcomes are not pre-determined."<sup>30</sup>

Critiques by figures like Jackson and Watson offer a richer and much-needed counterpoint to the statements expressed by Sorkin and others. Rather than concluding that the formal transformations of public space have led to its demise, they address these transformations beyond the ideal spaces' institutionalized boundaries. It is in *spaces of hidden appearance* — in plain sight or at the margins — that they find exemplary diversity, contention, disorder and genuine social engagement: all the civilizing attributes Arendt, Habermas and Sennett held in such high esteem.

It is crucial to stress, in both of these examples, the importance of direct encounter with the city as a means of reconceiving it. Their careful personal observations from 'on-the-ground,' direct contact provides a refreshing alternate means of beginning a meaningful dialogue with other urban publics. Without the inclusion of such counter-perspectives, design practitioners and theorists alike run the risk of misunderstanding, misconceiving or simply missing the full sight in plain view.



fig 2.9 Marco Cenzatti points out an example of contemporary heterotopias of difference. The Hongkong and Shanghai bank in Hongkong Central on Sunday morning as it is overtaken as a popular hangout for the local population of Filipino maids

fig 2.10 On Monday mornings, it returns to its role as a passageway

## Endnotes

- 1 Don Mitchell. *Right to the city: Social justice and the fight for public space*. (New York; London: Guilford Press, 2003), 35.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 55.
- 3 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 199.
- 4 Craig J. Calhoun, "Chapter 9 – Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces" in Calhoun, Craig J. and John McGowan (ed.). *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics. Contradictions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 245.
- 5 Ibid, 246.
- 6 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy in Calhoun," Craig J. ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 112.
- 7 Ibid, 126.
- 8 Such spheres include working class, women's publics and other marginal publics that may not have had a clear space to define or trace their actions.
- 9 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy in Calhoun," Craig J. ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, 118.
- 10 Craig J. Calhoun, "Chapter 9 – Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces" in Calhoun, Craig J. and John McGowan (ed.). *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics. Contradictions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 248.
- 11 Such similar arguments are made by Crawford (2008), Nancy Fraser (1992).
- 12 "What is civil society?" Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics (2004-03-01). Retrieved from [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm) (accessed on August 07 08).
- 13 Richard Sennett, "Reflections on the Public Realm" in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, *Companion to the City. Blackwell Companions to Geography* (Oxford ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 386.
- 14 Sennett, "Reflections on the Public Realm" in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, *Companion to the City. Blackwell Companions to Geography*, 386.
- 15 Richard Sennett, "Conclusion: Ordinary Lives in Disorder" in *Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*. 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1970), 198.
- 16 Or as Sophie Watson critiques : "There is a danger in idealized versions of a lost public realm... This long history of urban thought which emphasizes the loss of a once vibrant city life has taken a new turn in much American urban literature in particular towards a doom and gloom discourse of urban life and public space. " in Sophie Watson, *City Publics: The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters*.

- Questioning Cities Series*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.
- 17 Michael Sorkin, "Introduction" in Sorkin, Michael. *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xiii.
  - 18 Ibid, xiii.
  - 19 Ibid, xiv.
  - 20 Ibid, xiv.
  - 21 Ibid, xv (reference to Crawford's essay *The world in a Shopping Mall* further in Sorkin's edited work).
  - 22 Ibid, xv.
  - 23 Such statements are felt in much contemporary criticism, some of which have already been discussed – George Baird – and others whose arguments will follow – Sophie Watson, Margaret Crawford/Kenny Cupers, Franck and Stevens, for example.
  - 24 Sorkin, "Introduction" in Sorkin, Michael, *Variations on a Theme Park : The New American City and the End of Public Space*, xv.
  - 25 John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press (expanded version), 2008), 100.
  - 26 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "Forum Follows Function" in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 19-20.
  - 27 Sophie Watson, *City Publics: The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters*. *Questioning Cities Series* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 16.
  - 28 Watson, *City Publics: The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters*. *Questioning Cities Series*, i.
  - 29 Ibid, 5.
  - 30 Ibid, 3.

### 3.0 [IN]FORM[AL]

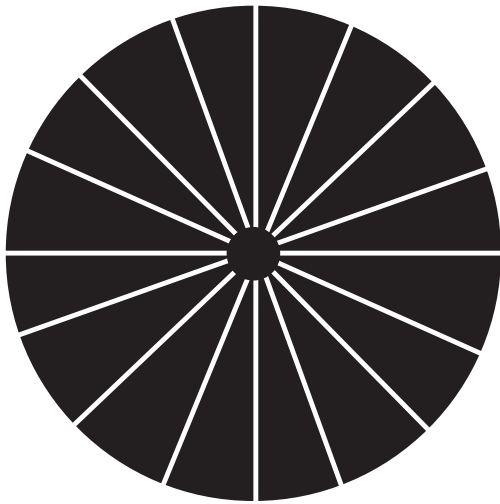
Between fields, which are regions of force and conflict, there are *blind fields*. These are not merely dark and uncertain, poorly explored, but blind in the sense that there is a blind spot on the retina, the center — and negation — of vision. A paradox. The eye doesn't see, it needs a mirror. The centre of vision doesn't see and doesn't know it is blind...

*...We see things incompletely.*<sup>1</sup>

HENRI LEFEBVRE

*What is informal?* Informality refers to the behaviours of actors. It refers to the procedures, or the outcomes of processes, whether the actors are formal or informal...it is a structure of action....A central problem that needs to be solved is how we account for the contribution of informality in our formal discourse about the city. Perhaps we should begin to pay more attention to the multiple ways informality insinuates itself into formal systems.”<sup>2</sup>

MICHEL LAGUERRE



- (1) Close your right eye and fixate on the cross. What happens when the center of the wheel is in your blind spot?
- (2) Compare this to what happens when you cover the center of the disk with your thumb. How is this the same/different?



- (1) Close your right eye and fixate on the cross as before.
- (2) Move the page until the black disc disappears in your blind spot

*fig 3.1 Finding and filling in the blind spot*

## EXPOSING THE URBAN BLIND FIELD

In *The Urban Revolution*, French Marxist and prolific urban writer Henri Lefebvre speaks of just such a problem identified by Jackson and Watson. He points out how the particularity of empirically specialized study of the city often limits our understanding of its complex phenomena. He extends the analogy of the human eye's blind spot into thought, awareness and knowledge, making it helpful to begin to understand the traditional professional relationship between design and use.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis borrows Lefebvre's analogy and terminology in order to rethink an approach to understanding and representing the city and its more informal spaces of appearance. It argues that that there is, in fact, richness in the seeming insignificance of both spatial and operational blind fields. Moreover, I propose that a fundamental reconception of public space's production can be discovered in a critical awareness of the blind field. Its exposure and research is paramount to a more meaningful understanding of urban society and space.<sup>4</sup>

## SITUATING ACTIONS AND SPACES OF *HIDDEN* APPEARANCE — LIVED DIFFERENCE, SPATIAL APPROPRIATION AND THE TACTICAL USES OF HETEROTOPIAS

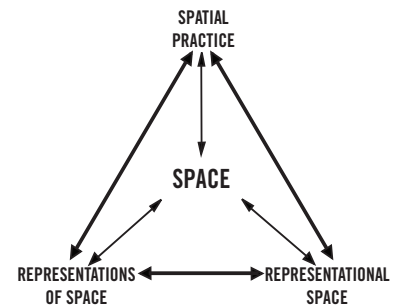
As a means of overcoming such professional blindness, including the rich material too often hidden from our view, Lefebvre advocates for the power of informal practices and spaces of everyday life as having latent potential for social and urban revolution. As a humanist, he rejected “avant-garde escapism, pretension, and heroicism in favor of a more sensitive engagement with people's everyday environments and lives.”<sup>5</sup> In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that space is produced in a *dialectical* manner and in a constant state of flux:

through its conception, use and perception over time. Richard Milgrom's *conceptual spatial triad* visually summarizes this aspect of Lefebvre's theory:

The three dimensions of the production of space have to be understood as being fundamentally of equal value. Space is at once perceived, conceived, and lived. None of these dimensions can be posited as the absolute origin, as 'thesis,' and none is privileged. Space is unfinished, since it is continuously produced, and it is always bound up with time.<sup>6</sup>

By equally weighting the user's actions and subjective perceptions with that of the architect's ideas and form, Lefebvre subverts the hegemonic role of the architect and planner as the dominant expert on space.<sup>7</sup> For Lefebvre, modernist rational planning and 'top-down' conception lead only to *abstract space*. Thus, he paves the way for a critical questioning of the primacy of Cartesian spatial abstraction.<sup>8</sup>

Of the same time and milieu, the members of the *Situationist International* (SI) movement, led by Guy Debord, were writing and wandering around Paris. Preoccupied 'on the ground' with many of the same questions as Lefebvre, the SI developed a methodology for understanding and representing this split between space as it was planned and perceived. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, the *Derive* is "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances" engendering "playful-constructive behaviour."<sup>9</sup> It sought to allow the city's *ambience* to dictate passage over the map or bird's-eye view, making *détournement* of maps and visually subverting Hausman's rational boulevards to conform more closely to the actually lived, *differential* space of the city.<sup>10</sup> Through such *détournements*, the object and subject are destabilized, much like in Lefebvre's spatial triad; the *dialectical* production of something new (*The Guide*



LEFEBVRE'S CONCEPTUAL TRIAD (MILGROM)

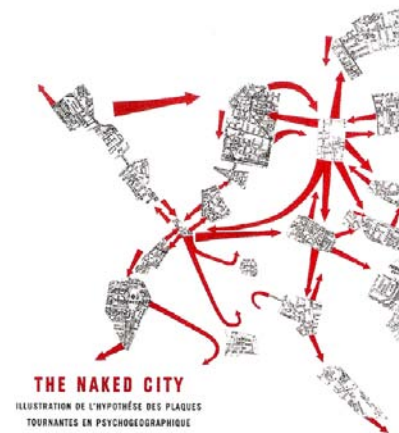
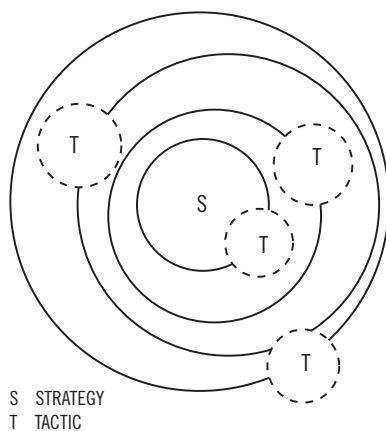


fig 3.2 Richard Milgrom interpretation of Henri Lefebvre's conceptual spatial triad.

fig 3.3 The Naked City map of Paris, Guy Debord, 1958 — a *détournement* of a tourist map of Paris, positing a representation of Paris as it is 'actually lived' rather than an ambivalent and omniscient view from above

RELATION - TACTICS AND STRATEGIES



*Psychogéographique de Paris*) is born. While the SI's work was based more on *situations* and writing, theoretical implications and analogies can be extracted from the group's engagement with the city. The legitimization of space as it is lived and perceived was crucial to much theory that preceded it.<sup>11</sup> As well, such *détournements* made the city's public experience subjective. Previous official or formal boundaries between the public and the private were blurred in favour of experiential boundaries.

Linking Lefebvre's and the SI's work is the particular focus on the simultaneously oppressive qualities of 'everyday life' as well as its emancipatory potential, which could not be realized without a drastic shift in how everyday life is lived and conceived.<sup>12</sup> For Michel DeCerteau, however, this 'everyday life' already possessed within its very practices the necessary tools for change. In DeCerteau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the user — “the ordinary man...a common hero, a ubiquitous character”<sup>13</sup> — is the central protagonist of the text. DeCerteau distinguishes *tactics* brought into existence out of necessity and often undermining the standard, the traditional or the predicted outcome, from *strategies*, which ultimately strive for rationality, homogeneity and predictability (a replicable model).

The strategy aligns itself conceptually with Lefebvre's definition of *abstract space*, and practically, with the very tradition of design practice. Conversely, tactics are, by their very nature, often unpredictable, fleeting, decentralized and, most importantly, ingenious in “the ways the weak make use of the strong...lending a political dimension to everyday practices.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the tactic is the way in which one might use and experience space ever-changing, adaptable, and as such, undermining the fixity and abstracted conception of it.

fig 3.4 Spatial representation of DeCerteau's relationship between the strategy and the tactic



DeCerteau's argument, in style, form and rhetoric, renders legible the relationship between use and misuse — strategy and tactic — as a dialogical one (as in language, the means to a constant evolution). The overall ambition of the work is to look at “the ways in which users — commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules — operate.”<sup>15</sup> He notes that such “ways of operating or doing things no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity...making it possible to articulate them.”<sup>16</sup> For DeCerteau, “Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, approaching a situation, a site or a space by looking at the actions that occur around it and how tacticians participate in transforming it through use sheds some light onto an action driven *praxis*.

By acknowledging the tactical potential of individuals, DeCerteau provides a strong counterpoint to Michel Foucault's concept of ‘docile bodies,’ in which man is increasingly controlled by the manipulation of the built world.<sup>18</sup> Instead, for DeCerteau, men and women ultimately have agency to act, for the power of the tactic lies in its fleeting and decentralized nature, giving it a power that allows one to reshape space temporarily, without posing a permanent threat to other ‘tactical entities.’ This renders the user the ultimate creative force in design, and use value is intrinsically determined by such a user.

*Heterotopia* is another useful concept in exposing the blind field. Coined by Foucault in a lecture given in March 1967, the term designates a range of spaces that are neither public or private — challenging the existent binary definitions of urban space of the time.<sup>19</sup> Foucault distinguishes several types of heterotopias, such as those of behavioural deviation (the insane asylum, the prison), of indefinite accumulation of time (the library), of illusion (the mall) and of compensation (the colony). Although open to many interpretations, he

distinguishes the term from *Utopias* by their “disparate and concrete existence within reality.”<sup>20</sup> As Joan Ockman notes “[heterotopia] represents counterarguments that are ‘other’ with respect to society and as such potentially liberative in their contestation of the space in which we live.”<sup>21</sup> This definition aligns itself rather well to the blind field, in its ability to contest as include the ‘other’ in the space of the everyday. It is in such a space that the blind field can most readily expand and appropriate.

Urbanist Michiel Dehaene and philosopher and art historian Lieven De Cauter have recently revived the term in an attempt to expand on Arendt’s public-private binary. For them, heterotopia serves as a useful concept to navigate a way out of Sorkin’s and others’ criticisms of contemporary public. They attempt to “reposition heterotopia as a crucial concept for contemporary urban theory and redirect the current debate on the privatization of public space.”<sup>22</sup> In their essay “The Space of Play: Towards a general theory of heterotopia,” they situate a kind of third sphere, residing in between *oikos* and *agora*, which they call *the space of hidden appearance*.

“that realm which is conspicuously under-theorized in Arendt’s analysis: it introduces a third realm between the private space of the hidden and the public space of appearance, a third sphere that we could venture to call the space of hidden appearance. It gives space to everything that has no place either in the public or the private sphere.... The spaces of the *polis* that belong to this third category do not abide by the binary oppositions that stabilize the distinction between *oikos* and *agora*.... Within the world of heterotopia these divisions are reshuffled and readjusted.”<sup>23</sup>

While this term more broadly refers to the myriad (mostly secularized) ‘sacred’ spaces of modernity — religion, arts, sports, leisure — which are anti-economical, infra-political and ultimately “bind heterotopia’s role within the *polis*,”<sup>24</sup>

it can serve as a helpful starting point to expand an ideal, but ultimately limited, binary definition given the heterogeneous nature of the city and its actor's needs. Thus, between Lefebvre and Foucault's spatial terminology, as well as the *Situationist International* and DeCerteau's reframing of practice and operation, a dialogue can begin to emerge about other public spaces and actions.

## EXPANDING THE SPATIAL FIELD — UNCONVENTIONAL PUBLIC SPACES

Designating a range of spaces equally marginal as those presented by Watson, but most often un-designed, Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens coined the term *Loose Space*. They argue that “loose spaces give cities life and vitality... allowing for [the] chance encounter, the spontaneous event, the enjoyment of diversity and the discovery of the unexpected,” all aspects that should be part of the public realm.<sup>25</sup> One can take away, however, certain tendencies. While the implications for design are unclear, they identify *appropriation*, *tension*, *resistance* and *discovery* as four key aspects inherent to many such spaces.

Developing on the concept of looseness, environmental psychologist Leanne Rivlin discussed the urban phenomena of *found space*. This term identifies an urban spatial condition by which individuals temporarily appropriate, or ‘reterritorialize’ space — with or without sanctioned authority.<sup>26</sup> The examples of spaces and users in question range from quotidian daily ones (local workers eating on Municipal library steps during their lunch hour), weekly ones (Saturday morning markets in school yards) to particular moments (pinned flowers near the remains of the World Trade Center).

Yet public space design has tended towards the monumental or the minimal, evoking the glories of past autocracies or simply the functional requirements of the activity at hand... one is hard pressed to find spaces that convey by their form the relaxed freedoms of a working, pluralistic democracy. Ironically, some of the best examples are provided by “found” spaces such as the steps of the New York Public Library, too steep streets reused as gardens on San Francisco’s Telegraph Hill, or formerly vacant lots in many cities, appropriated and modified for community use. Perhaps designers and managers, enthralled by history or burdened by a narrow functionalism, are less able than others to act on the ideals of our society.<sup>27</sup>

Rivlin identifies ‘freedom of choice’ at the heart of “people’s ability to discover possibilities in the environment and thereby to make use of found spaces.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, these spaces, for Rivlin, bear testament to a public that feels free to actively pursue their own interests in space — a far cry from the passive consumer that Sorkin presents as ‘the public.’

For professor and urban theorist Margaret Crawford, on the other hand, *found spaces* are signs of a potentially richer democratic realm. While the actions undertaken there are not always those associated with the idealized public, as much of the social aspirations of Rivlin’s *found spaces* possess, they do reveal a more ‘complex’ understanding of ‘public’ and ‘space.’ Trying to define an *everyday urbanism*, Crawford seeks an alternative to such a universalized concept of public space.<sup>29</sup> Her argument — stemming from Nancy Fraser’s critique of Habermas’ definition of the public sphere — explores the ‘marginal’ and emerging act of street vending in Los Angeles as a promising ‘reterritorialization’ of the urban public realm. As an example of this, Crawford cites a number of banal, everyday spaces overlooked by many, but tapped into by others. The front yard, for her, is

one of these spaces, and she describes its expanded use as follows:

Garage sales change the meaning of the single-family house.... They activate the front yard, which is usually a buffer space, and break down boundaries between public and private. The blurring of boundaries leads to new ways of conceptualizing these areas.<sup>30</sup>

The act of transforming the yard from an abstract, singular space to one used for socializing and gaining one's livelihood, transforms this space beyond its conceived purpose — from a traditionally passive threshold into an active one. This *détournement* of the yard reveals the inherent potentials in the interstices; in the margins between institutionalized spaces.

Two much smaller and extreme cases of such thresholds or gaps resulting from urban form are Gordon Matta Clarke's *Odd Lots* and Atelier Bow-Wow's *Pet Architecture Guide Book*. While not explicitly about public space, these projects provide a refreshing interpretation of other spaces resulting from the intersection of conflicting urban geometries and conditions. *Odd Lots* unveils Matta Clarke's accumulated purchase of a series of 'odd' spaces left over from lot divisions in New York City.<sup>31</sup> Though he never actually impacted any of the sites before his death, Matta Clarke's pursuit arguably revalued the residual spaces through their very accumulation. Ephemeral and virtually unnoticed until the display of their documentation, the gesture remains an important one in shifting perception about the possibility of 'gaps' in-between formal uses.

Atelier Bow-Wow's work notices small architectural insertions that emerge in similar gaps in the dense and overlapping urban landscape of conditions, rhythms and time in Tokyo.<sup>32</sup> The careful identification and typological and programmatic cataloguing of the spaces revalues them from their seeming

forgotten or leftover state as urban gaps. The work foregrounds what they call a ‘positive redundancy’ — leaving them open to users’ reinterpretations.<sup>33</sup>

Attempting to find an ‘other’ to contemporary controlled heterotopic environments, Ignasi de Sola Morales, Gil Doron and Kenny Cupers qualify an antithetical space in the city: the *terrain vague*, *space of uncertainty* or *dead zone*. At a much larger scale than the spaces described by Crawford, these spaces are often at the edges of cities and the remnants of larger processes and programs past. Holding a potential for a whole host of uncertain or indeterminate participant-driven uses — many of which would not find a home in traditional public spaces — the *space of uncertainty*, for these theorists and this thesis, can be seen as an alternate stage with much less of a watchful audience than the traditional agora. Instead, it provides a physical container or vessel in which the public can actively participate in temporarily reclaiming, retooling and reprogramming for the duration of their actions.

While the sites exposed by all these artists, architects and theorists range in location and scale, certain types do begin to emerge. A pattern of thresholds, gaps and vessels arise and challenge the traditional notion of public form and situation. As well, each is in some way a temporary *détournement* in the vein of the SI: first, through their subversion of conventional and preconceived notions of spatial use, and second by exposing the very ‘public’ feeling of most ‘free’ to take action upon these spaces. In the cases cited by Crawford and Cupers in LA, it is a platform for legitimization (according to Crawford) as well as an opportunity to see beyond Arendt’s ideal of ownership as a precursor to participation in the public sphere. Instead, the growth of such *everyday urban* practices in such spaces bears testament to the increase in ‘freedom’ felt by those individuals — like vendors or merchants — who challenge existing conceptions of legitimate citizenship.

## EXPANDING OPERATIONAL FIELDS — UNEXPECTED PUBLIC USES

Following many of the new readings of DeCerteau and Lefebvre's work mentioned, another means of reconceiving urban space is through the very operations that are undertaken within it — particularly those lying outside common consumptive practices. Urban actors' creative uses of tools beyond formal consumption — not the least of which are their own bodies — allow them to express themselves and in so doing, revalue both the objects and spaces they claim.

Urban theorist Iain Borden explores this very issue through the practice of skateboarding. Proposing a rhetorical (if not virtually indistinguishable) intention for praxis, Borden reframes skateboarding through the lens of Lefebvre and DeCerteau's critique of 'conceived' and 'abstracted' in favour of the 'tactical.' Borden claims that through bodily actions such as skateboarding, a recasting of the urban landscape takes place.<sup>34</sup> Whether conceived of as private or public, urban spaces are reduced to shape and surface. As such, they are temporarily freed of any consumptive capacity; their original design is subverted and redesigned through use. Even more recent urban infrastructures professionally redesigned to deter skateboarders do not seem to be effective. Reading through a performative lens allows for a destabilization (*détournement*) of preconceived notions of space and a new reading of the urban landscape. Thus, Borden's case is an extreme one, tipping the scales in favour of the user as the ultimate interpreter, arbiter and designer of public space. For Borden, skateboarding *is* architecture, "not as a thing, but as a production of space, time and social being"<sup>35</sup>

Much like Borden, urban designer Quentin Stevens also questions the role of urban public space through a lens of ‘use-value’ — though in search of a means towards an expanded praxis. Similarly, he focuses on the potential revealed through misuse and unforeseen playful actions in and around public space.

Playful behaviors illustrate the internal tensions between given action and what people like to think of as being ‘normal’ uses and users of public space...tension itself is part of the delight of urban experience, as well as being a powerful generator of new possibilities.<sup>36</sup>

Stevens focuses on the performative nature of public spaces, and their situation in the city. He breaks down the urban public realm into *paths, intersections, boundaries, thresholds* and *props*: all elements that tend to attract playful behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Carefully documenting how individuals temporarily appropriate spaces for an array of unanticipated uses, he argues that such practices cannot necessarily be designed for, which is part of their ultimate interest (and paradoxical relationship to design). Play challenges environmental determinism, forming something other than prescribed use.

However, Stevens concludes by going beyond the development of ways to read the city, eventually seeking ways to intervene, inciting further play and warning against the oppression of it. Ultimately, Stevens critiques ‘closed’ or conversely ‘abstract/even’ spaces, speculating on strategies for more ‘open-ended’ forms. While such forms can never truly anticipate all possible uses, he reminds us that:

Urban design should be loose, because in cities, behaviour and meaning are slippery, they remain at play. In *truly public spaces*, there will always be vagaries, flexibilities



and conflicts; all have their merits. For cities to be vital, urban design needs to recognize the nonfunctional and the fleeting, the partial and the uncertain; and to be proactive and invite exploration, by admitting overlap, exposure, doubt and risk.<sup>38</sup>

Elaborating further on the role of both formal and informal designers, architectural theorist and professor Jonathan Hill expands on the positive nature of playful use, misuse and appropriation. In his *Actions of Architecture*, Hill identifies varying 'degrees' of user engagement.<sup>39</sup> Central to his argument is that architectural form is made by use *and* design. The user, according to Hill, ranges from *passive*, to *reactive* to *creative*. Inspired by the Roland Barthes work 'Death of the Author,' Hill calls for the 'death of the Architect.' Such a 'death' would favour an awareness of, and dialogue with, the *creative* user, in contrast to a conventional understanding of design of an object, building or space terminating with its conception. He views such a death in a positive light:

In the formulation of architecture, when the role of the creative user is considered to be as important as that of the architect, neither is superior to the other. Contrary to expectations, recognizing the user as creative may augment, not diminish, the status and value of architects' skills.<sup>40</sup>

Arguably, the ways in which these thinkers recast of particular publics and their spatial practices reiterate Rivlin's faith in the user's willingness to *find* space and in turn *appropriate* it to suit his or her private and public needs. *Appropriation*, according to urban theorist Bernardo Jimenez-Dominguez, is an important part of what ultimately makes urban space, as he notes:

Possession as property ownership does not necessarily imply appropriation in the sense I use it here, as possessed objects can remain external to us (Sansot 1976). *I do not need to be the owner of an urban space to appropriate it. I appropriate it, but the city also appropriates me in a process that always operates in both directions...* Appropriation, arising from spontaneous practices, is part of the struggle for the right to the city.<sup>41</sup>

Whether manipulating space physically or through a set of practices manifesting one's spatial desires, appropriation transcends ownership of urban space in how it is continuously produced and reproduced. The city's appropriation of its public and, in turn, the public's appropriation of the city, ultimately determines the public's fate as true urbanites and the city as a truly urban.

\* \* \* \* \*



## ON METHOD

The following part of the thesis explores three fundamental actions paramount to the existence and maintenance of urban society. Production (by way of *Cultivation*) and the *Exchange* of those and other goods and ideas is at the heart of our collective urban existence, whereas *Play* possesses the ability to test, transgress and reframe the boundaries of the first two, ultimately propelling the evolution of their respective systems.

A range of methods exploring these actions include: personal and secondhand narratives, definitions borrowed from other fields of study — philosophical, anthropological and sociological most notably — and a set of examples international in scope. Helpful in situating, defining and expanding each of the actions in question, their role is to set an imperative for and foreground two particular *blind field* investigations. One is spatially foregrounded, exploring the *spatial* typologies and forms latent in the evolved urban landscape of Toronto. These include primarily gaps, thresholds and containers. The other type of investigation foregrounds *operational détournements* at hand — material, temporal and/or organizational. These often rely much more on the participant's introduction of tools and an unconventional or unexpected (often temporary) way of using the space.

As a tool of comparison between all the primary investigations, the following legend begins each case. While not claiming pure objectivity, its aim is to discuss the reconception of the spaces and tools in question. It first situates each case's foregrounded field as well as a set of comparative secondary characteristics distilled from the previous research.



ACTIONS

## GRAPHIC SUMMARY \_ THE FOREGROUNDED FIELDS

**SPATIAL**

**OPERATIONAL**

BLIND FIELD



PARTICIPANTS



MATERIALS



TIME (I)



TIME (II)



SPACE

- former conception
- reconception through participation

*fig 3.5      Graphic Summary — legend  
breaking down the general spatial,  
participant, material and temporal  
characteristics of the primary blind field  
investigations discussed in the following  
thesis section*

## Endnotes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 29.
- 2 Michel S. Laguerre, *Informal City* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 8-11.
- 3 Ibid, 29.
- 4 This reinterprets Lefebvre's point that "What we find in a blind field is insignificant, but given meaning through research." Ibid, 31.
- 5 Steven Harris and Deborah Berke. *Architecture of the Everyday*. 1st ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 11.
- 6 Christian Schmid, "Lefebvre's theory of the production of space" in Lefebvre, Henri and Kanishka Goonewardena. *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 43.
- 7 Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space* (Oxford, OX, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 303.
- 8 Lefebvre differentiates between abstract Cartesian space as detrimental, calling instead for a differential space that leaves space open for the spatial triad he proposes. At the time of writing *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre witnessed Modernist social housing projects sweeping a Cartesian abstract grid over France (and much of Europe)
- 9 Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), 22.
- 10 During the student riots of 1968, another act of détournement they witnessed was of the streets themselves. Students not only took them over, but further appropriated their cobblestones, throwing them in retaliation, making them tools of public action (see illustration of La Beaute est dans la rue propaganda poster)
- 11 The influence of such thought in the works of Iain Borden, Quentin Stevens and Jonathan Hill, seen further in the paper owe much to it.
- 12 Although the SI believed the student revolts of 1968 were to be the beginning of such a revolution, Lefebvre believed that "revolutionary change was a slower and more comprehensive process, less theatrical and individualistic, necessitating a more historical grounded engagement with everyday life." - Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, *Architecture of the Everyday*. 1st ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 21.
- 13 Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), v.
- 14 Ibid, xvii.
- 15 Ibid, xii.
- 16 Ibid, xii.
- 17 Ibid, xii.
- 18 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 143.
- 19 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" in Joan Ockman and Edward Eigen, *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968 : A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 420.

- 20 Ibid, 419.
- 21 Ibid, 419.
- 22 Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cauter, *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), i.
- 23 Ibid, 91.
- 24 Ibid, 100.
- 25 Karen A Franck and Quentin Stevens, "Chapter 1 – Tying Down Loose Space" in Karen A Franck and Quentin Stevens (eds.) *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.
- 26 Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, Leanne G. Rivlin, and Andrew M. Stone, *Public Space*. Cambridge Series in Environment and Behavior. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 84.
- 27 Ibid, 367.
- 28 Leanne G. Rivlin, "Chapter 2 - Found Space: Freedom of Choice in Public Life" in Karen A Franck and Quentin Stevens (eds.) *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007), 40.
- 29 Margaret Crawford, "Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life" in John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999, 2008), 23.
- 30 Crawford quoted in Ken Gwertz, (2000, November 30) "Outlaw entrepreneurs: Urban design professor supports street vendors' use of public space". Harvard Gazette. Retrieved from <http://www.hno.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/11.30/01-outlaw.html>
- 31 Gordon Matta-Clark et al. *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates* (New York: Cabinet Books, 2005)
- 32 Atelier Bow-Wow, *Pet Architecture Guide Book* (Tokyo: Warudo Foto Puresu, 2003), 8.
- 33 Mason White. Interview with Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, "Atelier Bow-Wow: Tokyo Anatomy" in Archinect, May 22 2007, <[http://www.archinect.com/features/article.php?id=56468\\_0\\_23\\_0\\_C](http://www.archinect.com/features/article.php?id=56468_0_23_0_C)> (accessed September 21 2008).
- 34 Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford [England] ; New York: Berg, 2001), 232.
- 35 Ibid, 1.
- 36 Quentin Stevens, *Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 217.
- 37 Ibid, 196.
- 38 Ibid, 219.
- 39 Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 2-3.
- 40 Ibid, 89.
- 41 Bernardo Jimenez-Dominguez, "Urban Appropriation and Loose Spaces in the Guadalajara Cityscape," in *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, 99-100.

# action



“the only activity that goes on directly between men without intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.

Action... [is] the condition of political life.”

HANNAH ARENDT  
*The Human Condition*, 1958

## 4.0 PLAY



Play, however, is not foolish. It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil...Play is a thing by itself. The play-concept as such is of higher order than seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.<sup>1</sup>

JOHN HUIZINGA

To consider the city is to encounter ourselves.  
To encounter the city is to rediscover the child.  
If the child rediscovers the city,  
The city will rediscover the child — ourselves.

LOOK SNOW!

A miraculous trick of the skies — a fleeting correction.  
All at once the child is Lord of the City.<sup>2</sup>

ALDO VAN EYCK

*“Even the gym is just a secondary space to train and build up skills.  
The city is where Parkour happens.”<sup>3</sup>*

DAN IABONI



*fig 4.1    Queen's Square — staring into  
the void of white*

Thursday [14-08-2008] 8:15am

*I embarked on a route taken at least twice a day — once there and once back — from my second-floor apartment on Main Street, across the bridge and past the coffee shop to school. Despite the lovely weather's draw, I've become somewhat ambivalent to what I encounter along this daily trip between the interior of my apartment and that of my office, despite the lovely churches, the bridge's arches and the occasional game of 'guess the floating debris' when gazing down over the Grand River's edge.*

*This morning, however, my routine was stopped short when a man ahead of me, having reached the other side of the bridge, stopped in his tracks and aimed his cell phone at the fountain.*

*Dry during most parts of the year, the fountain has a strange, somewhat ubiquitous presence as a traffic roundabout. Like most students, I presume, I seldom used it as anything more than a place to cross from here to there. Today the water was shut off, but only recently, by city workers. Voluminous white clouds of bubbles have erupted and swell inside and over the solid bounds of the concrete basin. These are the traces left behind by curiosity, mischief and opportunity at dawn, and these are now the subject of the man's photograph, and my gaze and inquiry too.*

*Moving closer, across the street and back up onto the curb, a sense of wonder and joy I hadn't felt in a long time came over me. This space I passed through, along and across so many times seemed newly foreign to me. For a moment, while I knew I was in Cambridge, I was also someplace else — a playground, a giant bathtub waiting*

*for me to jump in. Despite all adult instincts to be appalled at the environmental repercussions of such actions, I couldn't help but smile. I looked around me and noticed I was not the only one willing to come closer to this space of folly and abandon. An older couple suddenly appeared from behind one of the white mounds, the woman eagerly bending over to take a closer look.*

*A little further, a young boy — wide-eyed at the occurrence — and his father were also now approaching. At a close enough distance, the boy bent over and placed his index finger into the puffy white mound. Once assured, he dipped his whole open palm, his steps gaining speed and eventually tracing the entire edge of the basin, flapping bubbles across the air as he made a sound, half cry and half giggle. While I may not be quite so carefree, I dip my hand in one of the mounds of bubbles, and smile once more.*

*We are of course not alone in our new-found playground, as city workers arrive, readying the chemicals that will remove this beautiful white mess. "The fourth time this season," they say, as I approach the clouds. "Those kids," they say. "We are going to have to shut this thing down all season if this doesn't stop," they say.*

*As this temporary stage prepares to turn back into a ubiquitous traffic circle, and its cast of actors steps off their stage back into everyday, I blow the last bubbles off my fingers and step off the curb. Crossing the street, a glance up reveals one last smile as a bright orange-vested man snaps a quick one. I look back to see the nearby coffee shop employee bowing, centre stage, wrapped in a gown of flowing white.*



*fig 4.2    Queen's Square — dancing in  
the clouds*





*fig 4.3    Queen's Square — capturing it  
before it's gone*

## DEFINING PLAY & ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Lying outside quantifiable valuation, play is one of the most ephemeral means of engaging with the city — undeniably real to those involved, and virtually invisible to those not looking. Play, as described by Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, “is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion.”<sup>4</sup> For Huizinga, play’s significance lies in its capacity to exist both within and apart from everyday life. In *Homo Ludens* (1938), he sums up play’s characteristics as follows:

“...we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”<sup>5</sup>

The focus of Huizinga’s work centres on how culture bears the characteristics of play, identifying play’s involvement in aspects of religion, war, law the arts, philosophy and myriad other cultural constructs, as “play and culture are actually interwoven with one another.”<sup>6</sup> While play possesses a logic, and can be included in seriousness, it is different than defined or organized sport. While sport and other *reformed* and *bounded* plays exist in the urban landscape, play is, in essence, “improvised, the collective and



ephemeral creation of its participants”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, in *Man, Play & Games (1961)*, Roger Caillois adds to Huizinga's attributes, noting that play must be:

1. *Free*: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
2. *Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. *Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative;
4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. *Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. *Make-believe*: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.”<sup>8</sup>

Play is evaluated along a continuum between *paidia* and *ludus* for which, as Stevens points out, “[Caillois] retains a dialectical view of practices of *ludus* as freely determined and non-instrumental”<sup>9</sup> noting their importance in “allowing people to purposefully utilize and develop their skills and knowledge in tasks which are of their own choosing and under their own control.”<sup>10</sup>

Caillois characterizes four typologies (see fig 4.4) giving insight into how play's practice is different from “the instrumentality of work and consumption”

	COMPETITION	CHANCE	SIMULATION	VERTIGO
<b>PAIDIA</b> tumult agitation immoderate laughter  kite-flying  solitaire patience crossword puzzles  <b>LUDUS</b>	racing wrestling etc. <div>not regulated</div> athletics  boxing, billiards fencing, checkers football, chess  contests, sports in general	counting-out rhymes heads or tails  betting roulette  simple, complex, and continuing lotteries	children's initiations games of illusion tag, arms masks, disguises  theatre spectacles in general	children 'whirling' horseback riding swinging waltzing  volador (bungee jumping) traveling carnivals skiing mountain climbing tightrope walking

— which, by most accounts, is non-productive by traditional measures of capital.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the value of play to the urban is its capacity to lay outside the conventional and commodified use of urban space and objects, with the player in a reversed seat of power in their own reconceived world.

“Play as a medium of adventure infuses all aspects of city life. As ‘poets of their own acts,’ players in the city occupy space temporarily: they seize the moment to play as the opportunity arises, inserting the game into the interstices of the city’s grid and schedule...while lacking the kinds of institutions and spaces controlled by the powers that be, players transform the mundane into an adventure by means of a rope, a ball, a dance or a haircut in spaces occupied for the moment. Those adventures lead in many directions whose paths remain to be traced.”<sup>12</sup>

fig 4.4 Caillois’ Classification of Games

## SITUATING URBAN PLAY

The dramatic transformations of the urban landscape of two rather different cities — Amsterdam and New York — resulted in a substantial amount of photo-documentation of urban play. Although the intentions of each authors' work differ, collectively, this archive forms a body of work which begins to rethink the way in which one might perceive and characterize the nature of urban space as a ground for play.

In Amsterdam, in the time shortly after the end of WWII, the child became the focus of not only photographic interest, but a broader “(re)humanization in the political, economic and cultural fields.”<sup>13</sup> In the foreword to a catalogue of photographic works titled *The Family of Man*, exhibited in New York in 1955 and eventually across the world, poet Carl Sandburg points out that “the child was regarded as the symbol not only of universal equality but also of the hope of a better future.”<sup>14</sup>

For none other was this more true than Aldo van Eyck, who saw the child's relationship to the city as a crucial problem for architecture to solve. Between 1947 and 1978, van Eyck's answer to this problem was the development of over 700 playgrounds across the city of Amsterdam. While carefully integrated into the city fabric, the projects played an important part in the reform of play. Along with these, the advent of Junk or Adventure Playgrounds, community youth health centres and other such institutions catering to the exploratory nature of play traced a boundary around it which increasingly promoted its supervision. While these types may be less



fig 4.5 Families playing in the snow, Cas Oorthuys

fig 4.6 Wayward youth, Amsterdam, Henk Jonkers (1950)

fig 4.7 Children playing (on one of Aldo van Eyck's playground pieces) Amsterdam, Cas Oorthuys (1963)



viable today, “since childhood has now been privatized as a competitive project by parents who have internalized the demands to care only for their own children,”<sup>15</sup> they nevertheless play key roles in confining play to the world of the child. As architectural historian Roy Kozlovsky points out, the playground “altered the common experience of childhood [of the time] by restructuring the city to separate the world of the child from that of the adult.”<sup>16</sup> Play was given a boundary in both time and space, reducing the very spontaneity which characterized its most raw form. The photography of Violette Cornelius, Hans Wolf and Cas Oorthuys among others, as Kozlovsky points out, were instrumental in helping to construct a rhetoric for urban reform.<sup>17</sup>

Around the same time and well into the 1970s, across the Atlantic, vast swaths of New York’s poorest neighbourhoods were undergoing a deterioration of their own — the effect of an economic rather than a political war. Along with this, neighbourhoods such as Manhattan’s Lower East Side as well as Queens and parts of Brooklyn witnessed waves of immigration that began to crowd the tenements that remained. The introduction of an abundance of children in these neighbourhoods inspired a generation of photographers — most notably Arthur Leipzig who, intrigued by the wealth of children’s play and street games, began documenting them first outside his apartment, and then all over the city.<sup>18</sup> Leipzig captured the way play and games were adapted to the curbs, sidewalks, fences and, at times, even overtake the whole street with the simple act of making chalk tracings across its surface —reclaiming territories until the next rainfall.

From the 1970s to present day, photographer Martha Cooper has played an important role in uncovering such urban inventiveness enacted through children’s

*fig 4.8 Chalk games, Prospect Place, Brooklyn, Arthur Leipzig (1950)*

*fig 4.9 Post no Bills sign becomes a basket, Brooklyn, Arthur Leipzig (1950)*

*fig 4.10 Hide and seek, Brooklyn, Arthur Leipzig, (1943)*

play across New York. Education director for the New York 'City Lore' project, Amanda Dargan, describes,

"In a world where the agendas for children's play often are set by television and the commercial toy industry, one of [Martha Cooper's] goals has been to highlight the creativity of the economically disadvantaged...conducting photographic studies of play and [discovering] that the fashioning of toys from found objects and urban debris still flourished in poorer neighbourhoods in the city."<sup>19</sup>

Cooper's photographs capture the untapped potentials of existing barriers, architectures, infrastructures and ultimately urban detritus temporarily imbued with meaning by their inventive, ludic architects. Their tactical uses of what much of the city has turned a blind eye to reveals play's ability to *incorporate, transform* and at times even control parts of the everyday constructed urban landscape.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the reformist attitudes with which some of the photographic works have been used, the work of Henk Jonker and Martha Cooper bears witness to a greater "fascination with the wildness and non-conformism of children"<sup>21</sup> and points to one of the fundamental attributes of play: play remains adaptable and free based on the body's and mind's tactical abilities. Despite arguments about privatization and supervision, inherent in play is a latent potential for constant dialogue with and therefore development of the formal means to contain it. As Dargan concludes:

"Children and adults engage in an endless struggle to remake the world in their own image — adults organizing the play activities of children, and children incorporating these adult efforts into their improvised and spontaneous play world."<sup>22</sup>



fig 4.11 Sometimes the very state of the landscape as it exists is enough to prompt playful action — testing climbing skills on a security fence, M Cooper (1978)

fig 4.12 A standpipe becomes a fountain, through slight adaptation, M Cooper (1978)

fig 4.13 The 'detournement' of a police barricade into a go cart, M Cooper, (1978)

**BLIND FIELD**

## SPATIAL

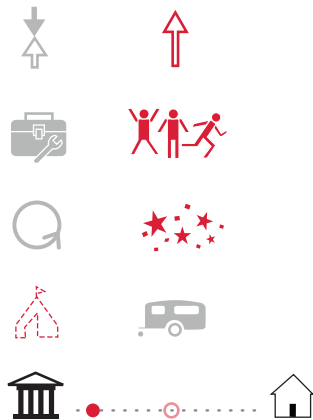
**OPERATIONAL**

INITIATOR: Sebastien Foucan, David Bell and others

PARTICIPANTS: typically young men and women, 16-25 years old

While much of the study of urban play has focused on young children, if we are to utilize Huizinga and Caillois' definitions, similar playful engagements with the city can also be found in adults' and young adults' actions and behaviours. While Stevens discusses this briefly, it is largely in relation to celebratory events, demonstrations and the use of props. Parkour, however, presents an extreme example of childlike play taken on by young adults.

The practice of *Parkour*<sup>\*</sup> involves “bodily encounters with space which provoke vertigo in the commonly accepted sense,” but extends further as a “direct confrontation with the physical environment...[where] bodily competition is framed by the risk the environment presents, including height, but also scale, speed, and traction.”<sup>23</sup> Parkour traces its physical roots back to the reformed urban landscape of



\* The original name of *Parkour* was *l'Art du Deplacement* — directly implying more than a game or sport, this displacement was conceived as an art form involving the body's ability to move from one place to another. While many versions circulate of the exact definition of Parkour, the most commonly accepted one — frequently attributed to one of its founding members, David Belle, is “a natural method to train the human body to be able to move forward quickly, making use of the environment that's around us at any given time.” <[www.parkour.net](http://www.parkour.net)> (accessed October 28 2008) This differs slightly from *Free Running*, a derivative of *Parkour* which, according to most, is more acrobatic. Sébastien Foucan's website claims him as the “global ambassador of Free running.” <[www.foucan.com](http://www.foucan.com)> (accessed May 30 2009)



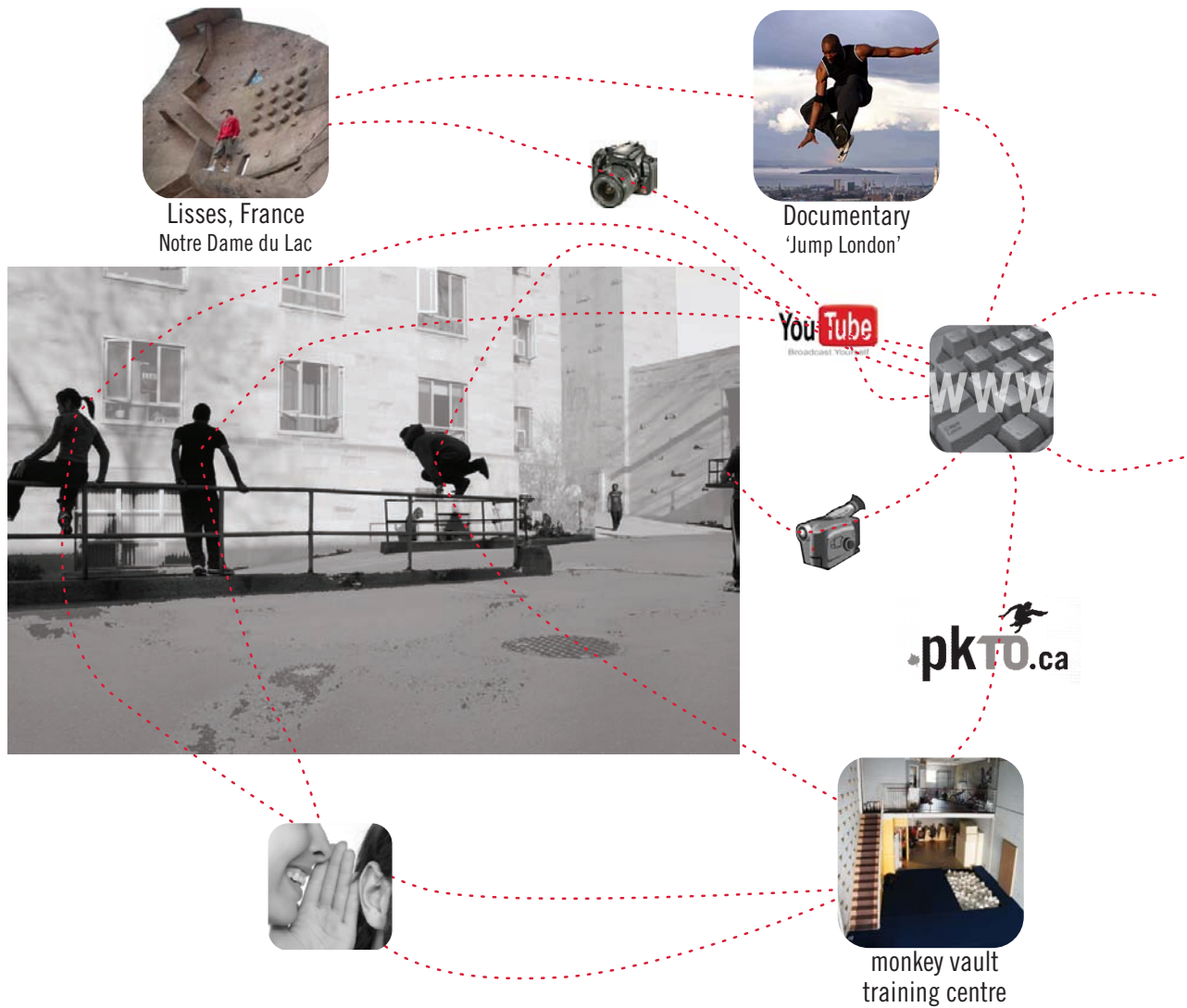


fig 4.14 The practice of Parkour in Toronto and some of the myriad forces which contribute to its spatial production



late modernist housing in the Parisian suburban township of Lisses, France. In the late 1980s, a group of its young male inhabitants — including Sebastien Foucan and David Belle — began to explore the urban landscape around their ‘concrete jungle,’ testing and expanding the boundaries of both their environmental and physical limitations. The men incorporated a variety of physical training methods known to them and picked up along the way, including Asian martial arts such as *Aikido*, and French physical educator George Hebert’s *Method Naturelle*.<sup>24</sup>

Parkour’s rise to popularity among the general public was in large part due to Mike Christie’s 2003 documentary *Jump London*, and his 2005 follow-up work *Jump Britain*— both of which aired internationally. The film followed Foucan and others running across a series of monumental and everyday buildings in London over the course of one day.

fig 4.15 Warming up at Queen’s Park  
before heading out



However, as many of its practitioners will note, they discovered Parkour through tactical means in more informal digital public forums. In the mid 1990s, short films made by the first *traceurs* themselves were shot, loosely edited, then disseminated virally through the Internet — a practice which many a copy-cat were quick to follow. While ‘handbooks’ on the practice have begun to surface, and *Youtube* and *Google Video* continue to be the most viable means of disseminating media coverage about it, *Parkour* has also gained additional mainstream popularity through recent blockbuster films and music videos.\*\*

For some, this mainstream popularity jeopardizes its founders’ intentions of a liberating practice, transforming Parkour from a liberating practice into an act of consumption. As of yet though, the practice remains playful, eluding the formalization of meticulous rules or competition. M. Daskalaki notes that, despite appropriation attempts, “Parkour as an activity...remains a very good illustration of engagement and dialectic as well as an expression of diversion and genuine inhabitation of cityscapes.”<sup>25</sup> It is by no means always celebrated or accepted, but for the most part the *traceurs* consulted over the course of the research claim that it is tolerated.<sup>26</sup> At the end of the day, its practice continues to happen and evolve where it began — in, on and around the ever-changing constructed urban landscape.

\*\* Most notably, the release of the 2006 installment of the *James Bond* series, *Casino Royal*, and musical artist Madonna’s 2006 video for the single *Jump* — both of which starred Sébastien Foucan. Foucan also joined Madonna on tour along with her professional dancers for a choreographed stage performance.

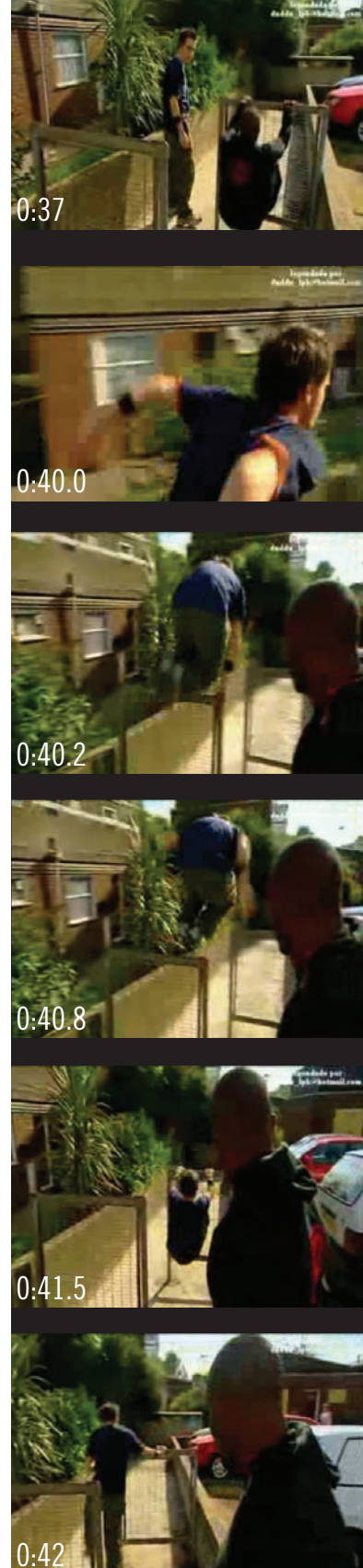


fig 4.16 Sequence of images taken from ‘Jump London’ by Mike Christie

[03-03-2008]

In French, the title given to those who practice Parkour — or l'Art du Deplacement — is 'traceur.' In English, its literal translation is 'tracer' and therefore the practitioner is he or she who traces across the urban fabric. As an architect, I would like to know what form this trace takes and how long does it last in the city?

As far as I can tell the only traces left behind are a few scuffs on a brick wall, and the occasional peculiar glances from passers-by.

But then what trace is left of these actions on the participant — on the tracer himself — at that point of encounter and beyond...

In other words, what is the city tracing upon me?

[04-28-2009]

*Hi Vicky! Sorry about the late reply...I'll be going out tomorrow at 5pm. We meet under the monument at Queen's Park*

*Feel free to join us!*

-Mandy (traceur, Toronto)

[04-29-2009]

Looking...they are always looking. Not just watching, but carefully and skillfully observing, assessing, reassessing. While some may have found these spaces before them, it seems as though each space is reconsidered anew every time...

The space between the rails is assessed...can my body fit between there? Will my body reach the other side? A trial or two, and then an even closer look...what else can I do here? How far can I push myself here, and what will it allow me to do?



fig 4.17 Play — collection 1



[04-29-2009]

Edwin tells me that when trying to hang from the walls at 'Hydro,' it's all about your feet: *"It is a question of applying enough horizontal pressure, towards the wall, through the balls of your feet. Shoes help, I guess, but it's really about learning how to press vertically."*

I then turn my gaze to his hands. *"And what about them?"* I ask. *"Depends. Some people put their whole hands, I just use my finger tips. It's just how I like it."*

This seems difficult and foreign to me, and despite his best efforts and patience, I can't seem to get past this sinking feeling of gravity weighing me down. I'm always slipping.



I get back to the office that evening and examine my own hands — could they ever gain enough traction to help me walk on walls?

[04-29-2009]

*"Before the wall was just there, now I think 'how can I do something different with it.' Not many people can just appreciate a pole either!"*

- Edwin (traceur, Toronto)



[05-03-2009]

When asked about whether the spaces he uses are public or private, Edwin answered, much like a number of the other traceurs I've spoken to, saying, *"I don't think about it as public or private, it's just somewhere to have fun."* Dan reiterated this sentiment, adding *"if there are no signs telling you it is private property then it is fair game. Generally, people know when they are crossing those boundaries. Some people see private and public. I see one giant playground."*





*fig 4.18 Edges 1 — Steven testing a chain fence which surrounds a tree behind St Micheal's College, U of Toronto*



*fig 4.19 Edges 2 — Mandy preparing to balance herself on a parking barrier*



*fig 4.20 Edges 3 — Max and one of many jumps over the loading bay rail*

Observing Parkour first-hand, one notices that while its practitioners may not all strive for the lofty goals of which its founders preach, they do in time develop a greater appreciation for the city beyond its private and consumptive qualities. The *traceur* constructs personal narratives and mappings of the city by physically engaging with it, and his or her sensitive vision is engendered by an intimate understanding of his or her body and its surroundings. This is reflected in the *traceur's* descriptions of his or her own personal cognitive mapping of the city.

The previous set of photographs is a testament to the ambiguous nature of the 'architecture' of Parkour. While it has gained popularity, Parkour will remain an alternate mode of experiencing the city; its physical demands inevitably exclude many. Thus, it continues to act as an extreme and tactical operational blind field. In this way, there are no direct implications for design that would absolutely satisfy these users, nor should there be. Many *traceurs* would no doubt recoil at the thought of a tailor-made urban playground. Instead, the *traceur* attributes meaning through his or her direct physical engagement with the constructed urban landscape. This type of play is a form of active, haptic *dérive*. Unlike skateboarding or cycling, where equipment still mediates user's contact with the city, Parkour reduces the space between the body and the city to its barest minimum — some thin soles, and perhaps the calluses on the palms of the *traceur's* hands. The direct *finding* and *reconfiguration* of a time and space for such actions is its means to appropriating the city and participating in its making. In this respect, Parkour participates in an ongoing dialectical design of the *paths, intersections, edges, thresholds, and props* it engages with.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

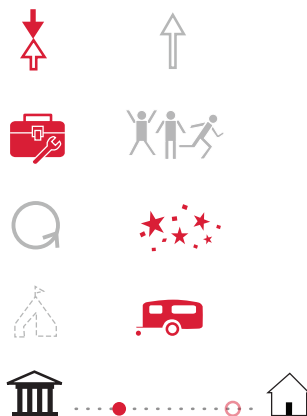
**BLIND FIELD**      **SPATIAL**      OPERATIONAL

INITIATOR:              artist, Corwyn Lund

PARTICIPANTS:      those who come accross it walking in the lane,  
youth, the homeless, urban photographers, etc...

Artist Corwyn Lund's *Swing Site* was erected in 2003 and displayed as a short film as part of a collective show at the YYZ Gallery in Toronto.<sup>28</sup> The video shows the artist walking down the adjacent laneway, installing a swing in a gap between two buildings, and proceeding to swing back and forth. While the film has since been screened at a number of galleries and independent film festivals, ultimately the swing itself remained *in situ* for quite some time and has become the subject of urban play, exploration and ultimately urban lore.\*\*\*

Inhabiting a triangular wedge of land which zoning plans indicate as belonging neither to one nor the other adjacent properties, the most convincing reason for the existence of this gap is revealed by some high windows in both adjacent buildings' facades, long since bricked up. The gap's depth runs the length of the typical Toronto Queen Street lot depth, just shy of 30 meters. Covering an area of just over 21m<sup>2</sup>, the gap's space and contents are almost indistinguishable when walking down its adjacent lane, often blinded to those not actively seeking it out.



\*\*\* Urban events and affairs magazine *Now* even cited the swing as the city's *Best local tourist attraction you've never heard of* in its October-November 2005 issue. <<http://www.nowtoronto.com/art/story.cfm?content=150208&archive=25,9,2005>> (accessed March 4, 2009)



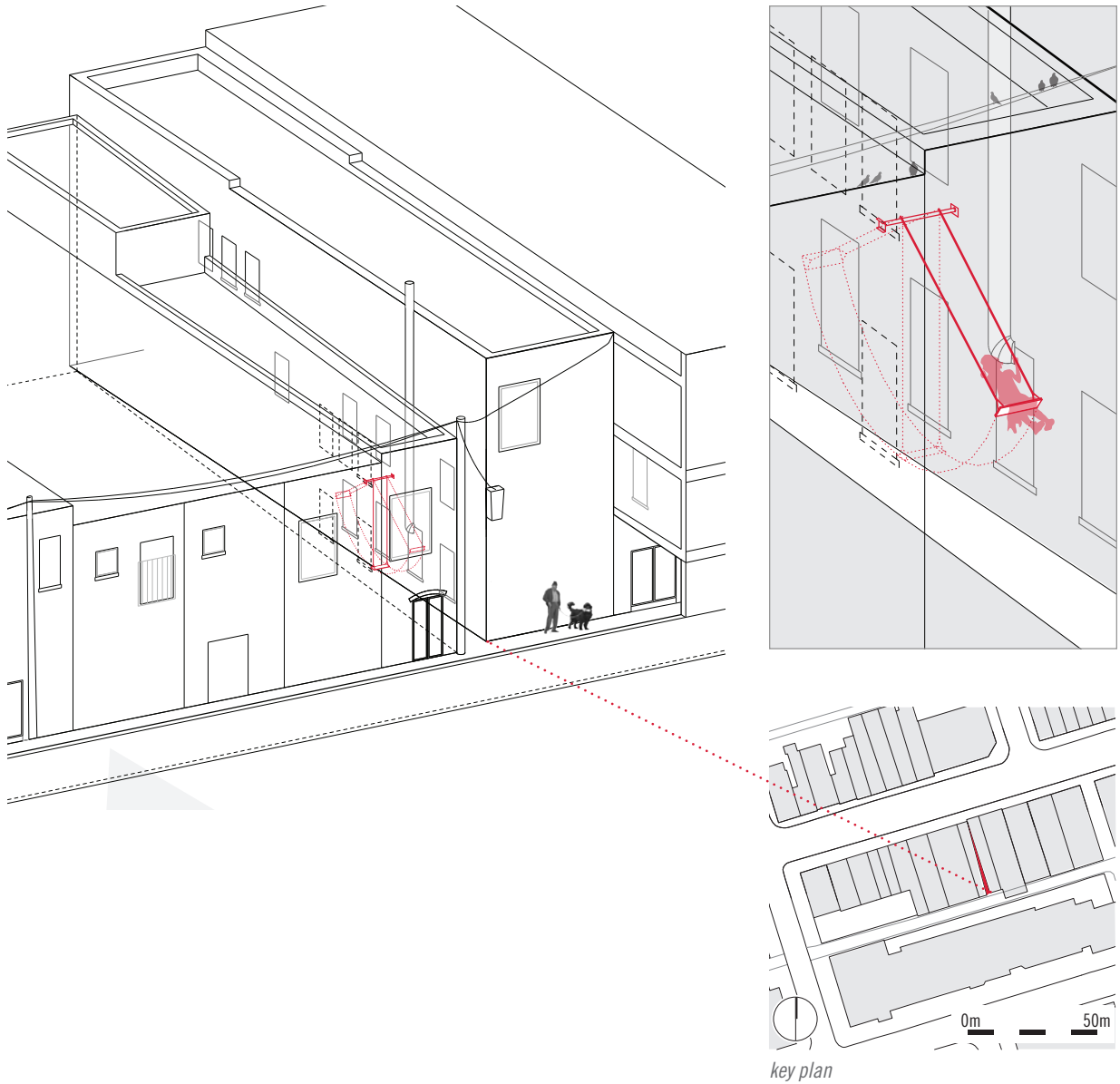
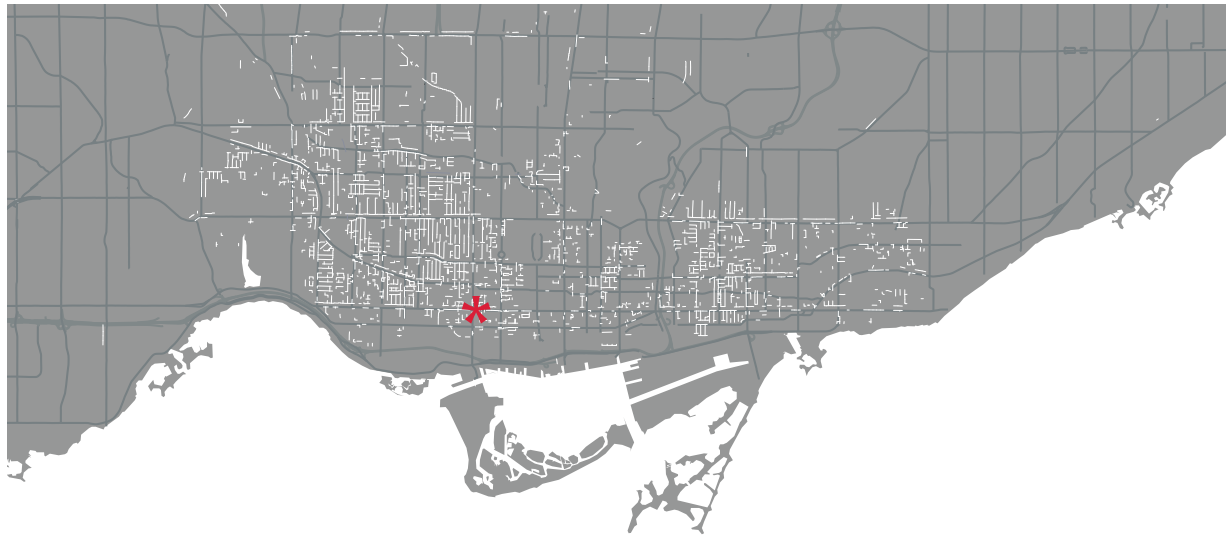


fig 4.21 Axonometric views of the gap that contained 'Swing Site'



0km 5km

\* STUDY AREA

— MAIN ROADS + HIGHWAYS

LANEWAYS

The Toronto laneway system itself is a set of blind fields in the city. Disjointed and underused infrastructures running a total length of 240km, they seem to oscillate between public and private ownership, use and feel through space and time.<sup>29</sup> Given this ambiguity, they bear traces of a wide range of informal, illicit, but in most cases rather benign activities (e.g graffiti artistry, drinking, sleeping, loitering...) — many of which are increasingly unwelcome in more explicitly central public space projects. They are sites of transgression, alterity, dialogue and ultimately appropriation — primarily as a stage for graffiti artists. Even when the *Swing Site* gap is by chance spotted, the space is quite often carpeted with an array of detritus from these and other actions in question — making the transgression into the gap that much more liminal.

fig 4.22 Toronto's streets and, more prominently, its 240+ kilometres of laneways

Between its 2003 installation, and its ultimate removal in 2006 Lund's *Swing Site*\*\*\*\* drew increasing attention. It would seem as though after a few first people *found* the site, captured and disseminated images of it in virtual forums, the knowledge of *Swing Site's* existence and playful use spread.<sup>30</sup> On digital photography forum *Flickr* alone, a search for the term reveals well over 1000 results — most of which are in fact images of people rushing back and forth on it.<sup>31</sup> While beginning as an artist's exploration of residual architectural space, it spread well beyond the intention of one project. At one point in its short physical life, the swing seat was removed (whether by vandals or the owners of the space remains unclear), only to be replaced with a new seat (possibly in December 2005) by a couple members of the public, dedicating “the new secret swing...to all of Toronto.”<sup>32</sup> A fence was later put up, but one can still note the space where a couple of its bars were pulled back in order to access the swing once again.<sup>33</sup>

Eventually, some claim in March 2006, the swing and its structure were taken down indefinitely, and a second, finer-grained fence was erected in front of the first — the state in which I came in first direct contact with the site. The reasons for this hardening of the boundary and discontinuance of the informal activities occurring there remain unclear.

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\*\*\*\* It has come to be known through its oral and digital public forum dissemination as *Secret Swing* and will be referred to as such.

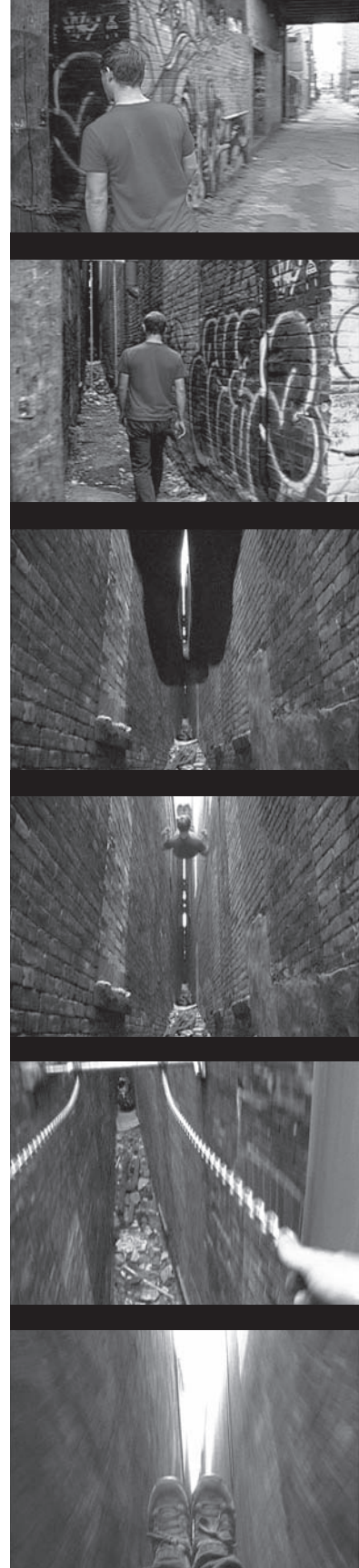


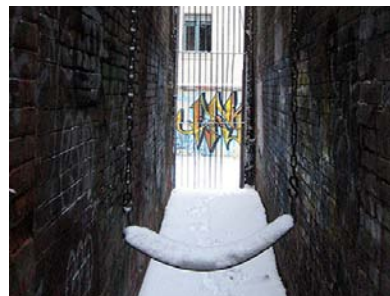
fig 4.23 'Swing Site' stills taken from film shot by artist Corwyn Lund

[06-02-2006]

*...A winter patio in Toronto would be a welcome addition, but in lieu I skulked off Queen Street and down the alley system that runs parallel — looking for the swing set I had heard about. I came across it, behind snow-veiled bars and with a layer of white on its seat such that it looked like a loaf of bread suspended by chains. The bars had been stretched back enough that I could wedge myself through the opening, stand in the hollow, triangular prism and gaze directly upwards at the framed overcast sky.*

*I set my beer on the ground in the snow within reach and dusted the top of the seat. Immediately I reclined in the swing, beer pinched between my index and thumb and the remaining fingers gripping the chains. I swung back and forth in the space feeling the gentle claustrophobia that the narrowing walls articulate towards the joining edges of the buildings, before being thrust in the opposite expanse that pointed my feet towards the crippled gate. I passed the afternoon here without purpose; forgetting my absent winter patio lament.*

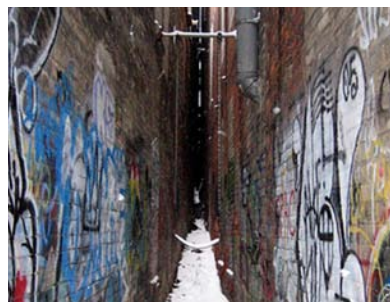
- Dan (student)



[?--?-2006]

*...Finding a swing in an alley is one thing. Actually sitting on it and defying space and time is another. For quite a while after that night, whenever I was in the neighbourhood, I would take whoever I was with to see the swing and enjoy that sensation again...*

- Brian (student)



[---03-2006]

*"Where is this wonderful, wonderful swing? Does it really work, I mean, can you swing way up high on it? Can it bear the weight of an adult? If so, coooooooooooooo!!!!!!!"*

- Gale (blogger)

fig 4.24 Play — collection 2



[23-07-2004]

*While to most of you this is the Secret Swing, it actually is right beside my girlfriend's... store. Today when I was loading stuff into her store via the alleyway, there was a young couple necking there.*

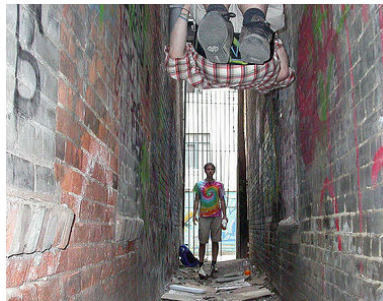
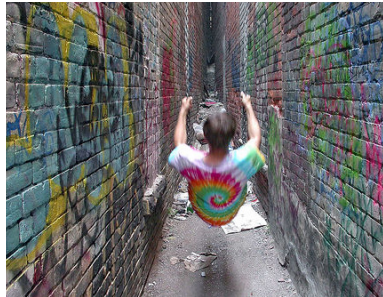
*If you divulge the secret location of the swing, this might never happen again.*

*I implore you.*

*Treat Paradise Lost with respect...*

*Tell the public about the secret sandbox, the secret ghost slide or the so-called secret Bermuda Triangle, but for the love of Christ, leave the secret swing...alone!*

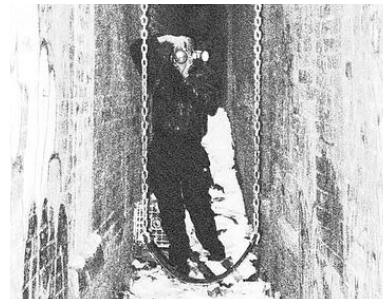
*- Carson (blogger)*



[03-08-2004]

*"Head south off Queen Street, a little west of Spadina Avenue, then east at the graffiti portrait of Zion. Go past the fire escapes until you're almost at the overhang. Climb through the gap in the wrought-iron gate and step over the bursting garbage bag. Then sit down, lean back and unleash your inner eight-year-old. Just watch out for the broken beer bottles."*

*- Globe and Mail*



[03-10-2007]

*This short excerpt from a *Globe and Mail* 'staff update' was the little guidance I had to find the swing. After some time spent walking up and down the lane, I stopped at what I suspected was the remnants of what I wouldn't find.*

*Behind two layers of grating lay piles of debris, a brightly coloured parasol, and no swing. I snapped a few photographs, and didn't give it much more thought until some weeks later, when filtering through the photographs, I saw the word inked onto a wooden slat near the fence. SWING? It was from that point that I began to look closer and listen more carefully.*

Arguably, one can speculate on the liability issue a swing creates for the private owners of the space, its adjacent building's owners or the City, and deduce that someone who wasn't willing to take on such a risk, tightened the space and sealed it up. Inquiries to those who have used the space only add to the confusion. Many had no idea why it was taken down, and lamented its loss as a wonderful public anomaly, while others reported second-, third- or fourth-hand accounts of rat infestations, drug use, homeless people sleeping at the site or even a violent sexual act leading to its ultimate demise — each, whether true or not, revealing the effects of owner liability in urban space. A series of temporary physical and digital makeshift memorials to this 'loss' continue to exist — the only physical traces of the space's temporary use.

As detritus continues to accumulate behind the fenced-off gap, so too does the online photo count of *Swing Site* in its prime. It becomes rather clear to me too now that an owner's *disappropriation* may not entirely erase the public's ability to continue its (albeit modified) *appropriation* through images and memories.

Both the gap reappropriated by a play element, and the myriad edges, boundaries and even the *traceur's* own body temporarily reappropriated through his playful practice, reveals the simultaneous potency and ephemerality of play in and on the city. The willingness to take on the risk — real or perceived — involved in both cases bares an implicit critique of the city's limitations for risk. In the first case, it is increased through the action's tactical mobility, and in the second, it is amplified by the action's erasure by way of its architecture (the swing).

The two also act as détournements of spatial and social convention. *Swing Site* places a fairly conventional play element into an unconventional space, and the practice of Parkour unconventionally operates within rather banal and conventional spaces. Both practices reconceive and revalue their architectures — the gap (space) and the body (operational tool) — anew.

\* \* \* \* \*



*fig 4.25* Gap 1 — SWING?





*fig 4.26 Gap 2 — Boarded up*

## Endnotes

- 1 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1938), 65.
- 2 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, the City and the Artist: An Essay on Architecture the in-between Realm*, eds. Vincent Ligtenlijn and Francis Strauven (Amsterdam: SUN, 2008 (written in 1962) 25
- 3 Quoted from an interview on May 03 2009 with Dan Iaboni, who's been training in and around Toronto for about 7 years - a relatively longtime compared to other traceurs – and is an important link for the Southern Ontario Parkour community.
- 4 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 10.
- 5 Ibid, 32.
- 6 Ibid, 23.
- 7 Zubin K. Singh, "The Break" (M.Arch Thesis, University of Waterloo School of Architecture), 104.
- 8 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* ([New York]: Free Press, 1961), 9-10.
- 9 Quentin Stevens, *Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007), 34.
- 10 Ibid. 34.
- 11 Ibid. 36.
- 12 Amanda Dargan and Steven J Zeitlin, *City Play* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 194.
- 13 Liane Lefavre, Ingeborg de Roode and Rudolf Herman Fuchs, *Aldo Van Eyck: The Playgrounds and the City* (Amsterdam : Rotterdam: Stedelijk Museum ; NAI Publishers, 2002), 144.
- 14 Anja Novak, "Innocence reborn: Child photography in the Netherlands from 1945 to 1960" in Ibid, 104.
- 15 Roy Koslovsky, "Urban Play: intimate space and postwar subjectivity" in *Intimate Metropolis: Constructing Public and Private in the Modern City*, eds. Vittoria Di Palma, Diana Periton and Marina Lathouri (London: Routledge, 2009), 212.
- 16 Koslovsky, "Urban Play: intimate space and postwar subjectivity" in Ibid, 198.
- 17 Koslovsky, "Urban Play: intimate space and postwar subjectivity" in Ibid, 203.
- 18 Amanda Dargan and Steven J Zeitlin, *City Play*, 5.
- 19 Ibid, 5.
- 20 Ibid, ii.
- 21 Lefavre, Roode and Fuchs, *Aldo Van Eyck : The Playgrounds and the City*, 105.
- 22 Dargan and Steven J Zeitlin, *City Play*, 162.
- 23 Stevens, *Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces*, 41.

- 24 Hebert's methode Naturelle – is a training method by which the body and moral spirit's best training comes from a direct confrontation with the 'natural' world, rather than through competitive sport or confined weight training. G. Hebert, *L'éducation physique virile et morale par la méthode naturelle* (Librairie Vuibert France, 1943).
- 25 Maria Daskalaki et al, 'The 'Parkour Organisation': inhabitation of corporate spaces', *Culture and Organization*, 14:1 2008 (accessed April 04 09), 54-55.
- 26 based on field work conducted 04-29-2009.
- 27 Stevens, *Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces*, vii.
- 28 Sarah Milroy, "Odes to a City under siege," in *Globe and Mail*, September 11, 2003 Page R7 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com>> (accessed 04 11 2008)
- 29 Charles Waldheim and others, *Site Unseen : Laneway Architecture and Urbanism in Toronto* (Toronto: Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto, 2004), cover.
- 30 < <http://spacing.ca/wire/2005/12/18/secret-swing-back-in-action/>>
- 31 <<http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=secret+swing>> (accessed April 28 09)
- 32 according to a photograph posted <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/photopia/76275445/>>
- 33 based on author's observation during a first site visit, 03-10-2007.

## 5.0 EXCHANGE



The informal side of the urban economy is not a separate sector. It is an interdependent and subjugated sector, from which, through a bottom-up approach, we may understand the inner working of the urban economy.<sup>1</sup>  
MICHEL LAGUERRE

Vending is a complex and diverse economy of micro-commerce, recycling, and household production....vending supplements income rather than constituting an occupation — or, more likely, supports only the most marginal of existences...both sellers and goods can be read as local messages, attesting to the economic necessities and cultural values of a neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup>  
MARGARET CRAWFORD

*They are out there when the weather is nicer than today. They keep to themselves. They make things, so they have something to do, try to sell them, and go home to their families to make dinner when they've had enough for the day.*<sup>3</sup>  
BANK TELLER (local witness)



*fig 5.1 Threshold 1 — the vestibule and its open door*

Sunday [03-11-2007] 10:05am

*She approaches from the east at the crosswalk. Where the sidewalk lowers and the street rises, she crosses and arrives at her corner.*

*One hand drags a full cart, the other a loaded dolly.  
She examines the site briefly, removes the small broom from the side of her cart, and dusts off any debris. Her back to the bicycle, and Spadina behind that, she positions her portables in front and to the side of her.*

*Unloading begins:*

*Large plastic bag — white with red and blue plaid. It can be purchased down the street at the Asian dollar store for one dollar and twenty five cents. In its current state, this first item appears to be heavy. Placed behind the dolly, it stops the dolly from rolling out into traffic.*

*Cardboard crates — two are placed upside down, to the side of the dolly. A third is turned over and placed back on. The crates are the tallest of the containers, and appear to be the most structurally sound.*

*Styrofoam box — this is turned over and placed at the edge of the dolly. Its contents are temporarily placed on the cardboard crates, and then replaced on the Styrofoam once it is turned over.*

*Styrofoam lids — these are placed on top of the cardboard boxes and (I assume) are there for hygienic purposes.*

*Into the lids, unloading continues:*

*Bok choy — there are at least six bunches, piled high.*

*Unidentified greens — they are smaller than the bok choy, with rounder, slightly darker leaves. There are a few bunches (what looks like five).*

*Beans — long and stringy. They are put on the front Styrofoam box.*

*Hot peppers – too many to count, they are in a clear bag and kept close to her work surface on a Styrofoam lid. They would be returned at the end of the day, untouched.*

*Onions — these are kept in bags, in a small box. They are placed on the Styrofoam container next to the beans.*

*Melons — these are the last edibles to come out from the bottom of the cart. One is dark green, cut open to reveal an orange flesh, and the other is a lighter green with spots.*

*Though she has pulled out the last of the items, her hands continue to move. She pulls out a small knife and starts meticulously trimming the unidentified greens. Calmly, her hands move back and forth...*

*They move as she looks around for suspects. They move as she chats with the vendor that is setting up beside her. They move as she calls to the young boy playing in the threshold of the building across from her.*

*A man walks towards her, something is said, she nods her thanks and he carries on.*

*The machine is brought to a halt.*

*A shift in gears, the movement picks up again. Slightly faster tempo, process in reverse.*

*Melons — Onions — Hot peppers — Beans — Unidentified greens — Bok choy.*

*She waves one hand at the children to move aside, while the other packs up the last of the goods. Essentials contained. The portables start their trip across the pedestrian flow and into the threshold.*

*First the cart, full of food. The young boy stops playing to help. Up and over the step.*

*She then packs up the dolly. The lids are turned right side up. They're stacked under their Styrofoam boxes. The cardboard crates are stacked on top of those. Up and over the step these go. The boy helps.*

*She returns with the small broom. Every loose leaf and piece of packaging debris is swept away. One hand collects the last of the remnants. The other drags the large plastic bag across the busy sidewalk. Up the step.*

*A brief halt...authorities pass...all is clear.*

*She drags the bag to her edge, just shy of the bicycle and sets it in place to receive the dolly.*

*She drags the dolly of cardboard crates and Styrofoam boxes and Styrofoam lids, and unloads them just as before. Next is the cart which she sets beside the dolly, and promptly begins to unload again.*

*Bok choy — Unidentified greens — Beans — Hot peppers — Onions — Melons.*

*As soon as the last melon is out, she pulls out her knife, reaches back for the pile of Greens and continues where she left off, trimming and chatting away and teasing the boy who is back to his games in the empty threshold.*





fig 5.2 Threshold 2 — the street edge and its appropriation

## DEFINITIONS & MOTIVATIONS OF INFORMAL URBAN EXCHANGE

The exchange of *things* — ideas, goods and services all ranging in ephemerality — has always played an important role in shaping the space and operations of urban space. In turn, urban space has also been shaped by these. The exchange and consumption of goods and services fundamentally affects how we conceive of, design and interact within our cities.<sup>4</sup>

The urban landscape is affected by these informal systems of exchange and their participants. These urban actors and their practices contribute to the production of increasingly vibrant and complex economic and social systems. Operating mostly in *blind fields* in between the cracks or at the edges of larger formal systems, their *informal* state does not make them lesser than their formal counterparts, or necessarily better when formalized themselves. Instead, in most cases, as social anthropologist Michel Laguerre notes, both formal and informal economies are reliant upon each other:

“The failure to see these different kinds of intermingling has left some to posit the informal sector as a separate phenomenon in a dual social system. This cannot be proven by empirical data. Analytically, it stands as an interdependent sector or an interstitial process in a pluralist economic structure. It owes its existence and survival to its linkage to the formal sector. Thus the informal economy provides a basis or field of action for the actors of the informal city.”<sup>5</sup>

While seemingly weak to some, informal exchanges, when examined further, reveal a set of dynamic and clever uses of the urban space and materials.

## SITUATING INFORMAL URBAN EXCHANGE

In major cities across the world, examples of informal exchange can be cited. In Hanoi, for example, the profession of ‘street barber’ is still a relatively common one amidst the generation of older Vietnamese men. Dating back to 18<sup>th</sup> century colonialism, the practice increased in popularity during times of economic downturn, making this self-employment with limited initial investment or training a viable option.<sup>6</sup> With a limited amount of *tools* (a towel, scissors, a blade, etc), *furnishings* (a chair and a mirror) the barber is able to claim part of the city to make a daily wage and socialize with customers. Temporarily, he transforms a zone of sidewalk and nearby blank walls through these actions into a space of informal economy. His minimal tools allow him to move his shop to busier streets based on local demand or regulations of formal water and electricity supplies. Although the practice is currently under scrutiny by the government in an effort to “cut down on traffic accidents” and to clean up the city, a barber’s ability to relocate may prolong the existence of such a practice.

Increasingly, around formal places of commerce and tourism in large city centres, busking or other types of ‘performance’ in public is a source of artistic exchange and income for local or traveling artists, those without secure employment trying to earn a wage or those who simply wish to perform. While some increasingly possess permits — formalizing their participation in public space and events — there are others who continue this practice without formal sanction.



fig 5.3 A Street Barber in Hanoi, Vietnam

fig 5.4 Hanoi Street Barbers appropriate the space of the street, almost entirely overtaking the sidewalk as well as attaching various temporary items in order to undertake their trade

fig 5.5 A busker performing in the Parisian metro system



fig 5.6 The transformation of a market outside Bangkok situated on either side and across operational railway tracks. The train runs through the space of the market multiple times per day, and when it does, vendors move carts and awnings back, revealing previously hidden tracks. Once the train has passed, vendors proceed almost immediately to lower their awnings and roll their wares back onto the tracks.

In Paris, for example, a common sight on certain subway lines is the practice of *metro busking*. There is a growing community of these performers amidst the underground public transit system — some working alone, and others in groups.<sup>7</sup> Given the limited supervision of the trains and the seemingly benign nature of these actions, a growing community of these buskers fashion portable instruments out of adapted karaoke machines strapped to dollies. More traditional instruments such as accordions and guitars are also used.

The duration of their stay is calibrated to the length of one or two songs, and a bit of time to collect some change, hop off one train and onto another. The tactical movement through the regular temporal patterns of the metro system results in the informal exchange of a bit of money for enjoyment and spectacle. Much like the barber, the musician adapts and reconstitutes minimal portable tools — fashioned informally out of goods from formal economies — and revalues them for his or her own needs.

This tactical relationship to the strategic system of a train's temporal and spatial infrastructure can take on other forms. Rather than adapt mobile tools to move into and through the train, a market in Bangkok instead adapts the residual spaces around and on a slower, infrequent train's tracks as a habitual food and goods market. The Mae Klung market expanded into this urban threshold due its increased visual exposure to train passengers (potential buyers) and the limited space in the more formal interior market stalls.<sup>8</sup> Multiple times per day, a passenger train passes through the space, and the market adapts accordingly. It takes advantage of the underused space of the rail lands, along with the predictable, rather slow pace of



the train, and has adapted accordingly to retract as needed when the train is near. Once the primary use has passed, the market quickly resumes and carries on.

Tactically appropriating the in-between space of the rail lands, the market stalls demonstrate a case of two seemingly incongruent programs inhabiting the same space at different times — and illustrate the important property the threshold possesses. While the market is the weaker and more ephemeral of the two systems, it is also the most flexible and adaptable, and gains its urban strength accordingly.

A similar phenomenon emerges in a number of threshold spaces that Margaret Crawford identifies in her study of informal trade sites in the Latino neighbourhoods of Los Angeles in the late 1990s. Given the influx of people arriving from Mexico and settling in this community, the common Mexican practice of street vending and other informal exchanges in public has become increasingly commonplace and adapted to certain East LA neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> Crawford cites examples of common, almost banal elements of the everyday North American landscape and their unforeseeable cultural adaptation for informal exchange. Chain-link fences, traffic islands, strip mall parking lots and their surrounding grassy, asphalt and gravel verges become new grounds for carving out economic opportunity.

Like the rail corridor which houses the Mae Klung market, these edge spaces in Los Angeles are expanded to serve more complex purposes of social, cultural and economic exchange — blurring the boundaries between public and private uses, as well as challenging accepted social norms of spatial use.<sup>10</sup>



*fig 5.7 A closer look at the structure reveals a relatively simple system of manually retractable bamboo posts and canopies. Once the train passes, all is returned back to normal within seconds*

*fig 5.8 Reappropriating a shopping cart to vend oranges from verge*

*fig 5.9 The private fence as a market*

## EXCHANGE REFORMED & RECLAIMED

While Crawford notes these emergent phenomena in Los Angeles, traditionally, this type of appropriation is more the exception than the rule in North American cities. Hybrid and tactical systems of use have traditionally been much less common, if not virtually unheard of. The exchange of almost all ideas, performances, goods and services in North American cities has moved away from informality — both in space and operation — in favour of ideals of progress. Modernist planning strategies arose shortly after WWII, promoting ideals of order, control and standardization of goods and services. The widespread transformation of cities through zoning — the parceling of areas of the city into ordered, divided uses — assured that, for example, a supermarket would not dare find itself anywhere near a passenger railway line (as in the above mentioned case of Mae Klung). Semi-private indoor facilities create an environment easier to predict and control. Ensuring accountability and liability for the items of exchange is an important part of our common law system, with the consumer's best interest in mind. Unfortunately, this system has traditionally drawn such a hard boundary that many individuals can no longer afford to participate in it.

However, this is changing from the ground up. Urban centres across North America and elsewhere are increasingly subject to greater forces than those occurring within their own political and geographic boundaries.<sup>11</sup> Arguably, the aforementioned forms of exchange can be traced back in some way to the many forces of globalization. These include the flows of people and capital increasing

in speed and distance, the disempowerment of citizens deemed marginal or *other* than the primary consumer in large exchange systems (be they young, old, migrant, disabled, etc.) and the widening gap between both rich and poor countries and the rich and poor residents of developed countries.<sup>12</sup> While the formal systems of exchange across global networks are increasing and expanding in scope and governance, informal ones at local levels are tactically finding *blind fields* within which to exist. As Watson points out, “The global has by no means consigned the local to history, indeed in some respects it has provided the very space for the local to be reasserted.”<sup>13</sup>

A primary driving force in this transformation is the increasing mobility of different publics — as well as the different attitudes towards exchange in public space which comes along with them.<sup>14</sup> While social and cultural definitions of public/private boundaries can vary drastically, and tensions can arise when preconceived notions of what is acceptable in public are challenged, ultimately the result of these conflicts is a more vibrant, dynamic and ultimately democratic urban space. Watson, paraphrasing Madanipour, warns that “to prevent these boundaries [from] being deployed as an exercise in power, there needs to be a possibility for them to be redrawn, and for a greater flexibility to allow dialogue to occur.”<sup>15</sup> As various groups of publics and the needs they possess grow increasingly complex and nomadic, so too can their uses of urban space for exchange. For many North American cities, the fields where such renewed and creative appropriations unfold seem to be where formal and predominant cultural rules break down, or are at least bend slightly.

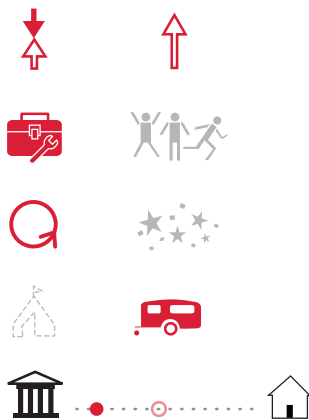
\* \* \* \* \*

**BLIND FIELD**      **SPATIAL**      OPERATIONAL

INITIATOR:              urban planning and building design, local businesses

PARTICIPANTS:        recent and long-term immigrant informal  
vendors, street performers, homeless, etc...

The diverse city of Toronto bears witness to such creative uses for the emergence and maintenance of informal economies. A relatively longstanding example can be seen in the public and semi-public spaces around the intersection of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street West in the heart of Chinatown. Its thresholds have a history of being temporarily claimed by an array of publics. Its sidewalks host a number of temporary merchants ranging from shopkeepers' formalized sidewalk stalls to more contentious examples not legally sanctioned. Street vending or hawking is a widespread example of such unsanctioned — but nevertheless tolerated — uses of public and semi-public space.



For those who wish to pursue formal means of conducting temporary street exchange, Chinatown is currently within the bounds of prohibited street vending. Permits are no longer issued for street exchange in much of the downtown core, with exceptions for special occasions.<sup>16</sup> When permits were issued in the past, the city regulated the sidewalks it does allow vending on at a maximum distance of 0.46 meters from the edge of commercial building facades.<sup>17</sup> The physical manifestation of this commercial allowance has led to a number of rectangular markings painted outside certain retail storefronts.



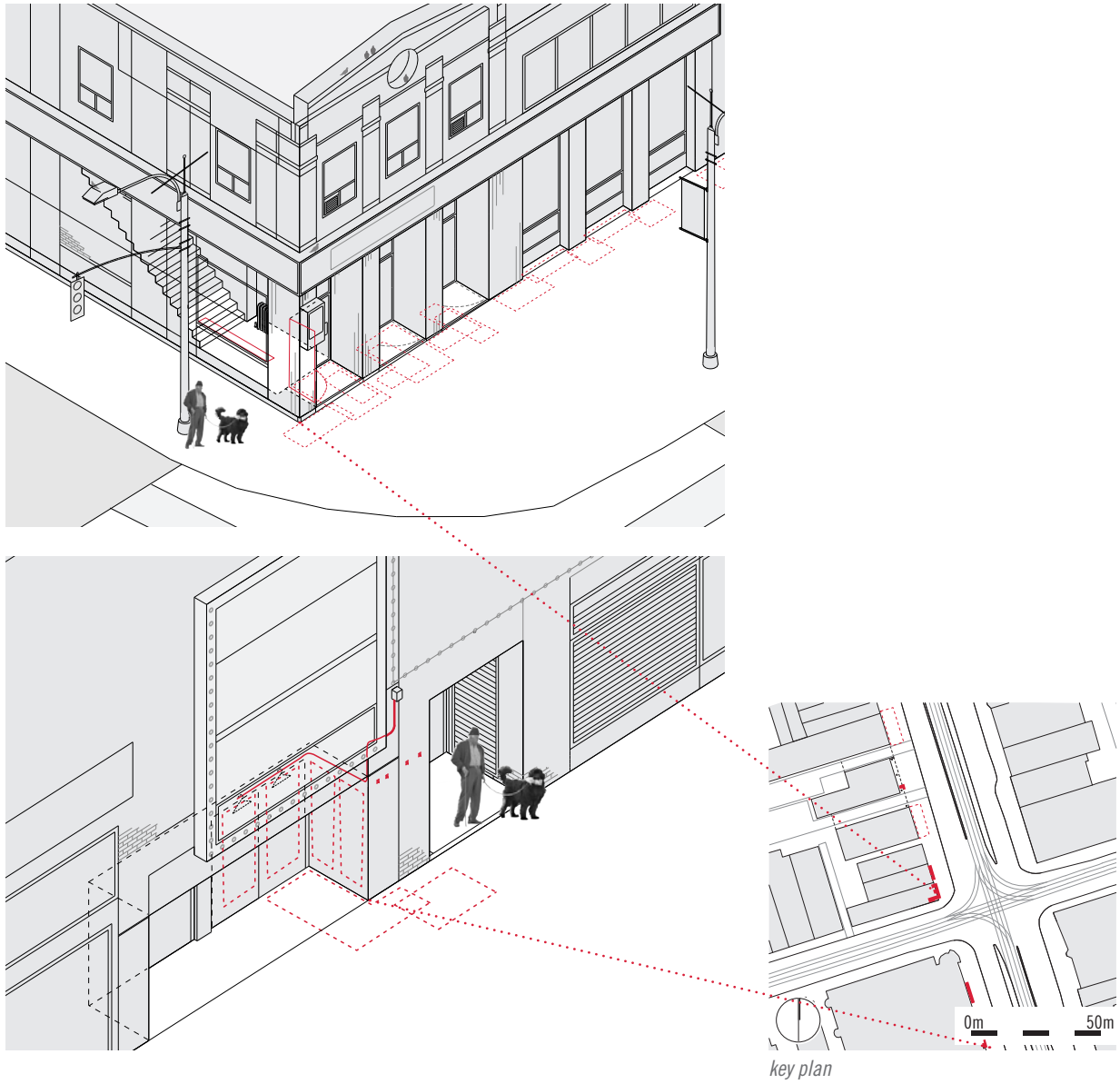


fig 5.10 Axonometric documentation —  
building to sidewalk thresholds

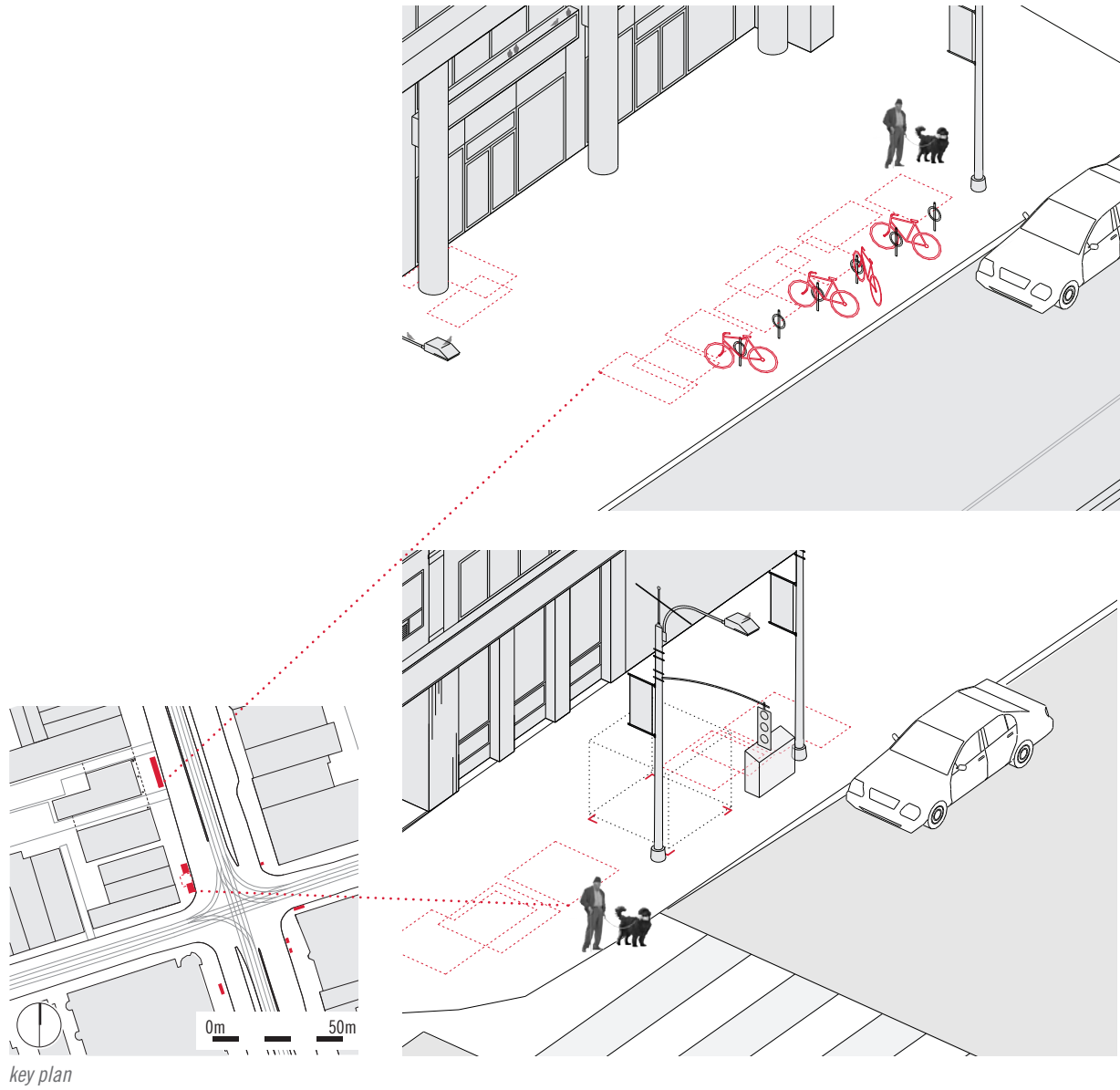


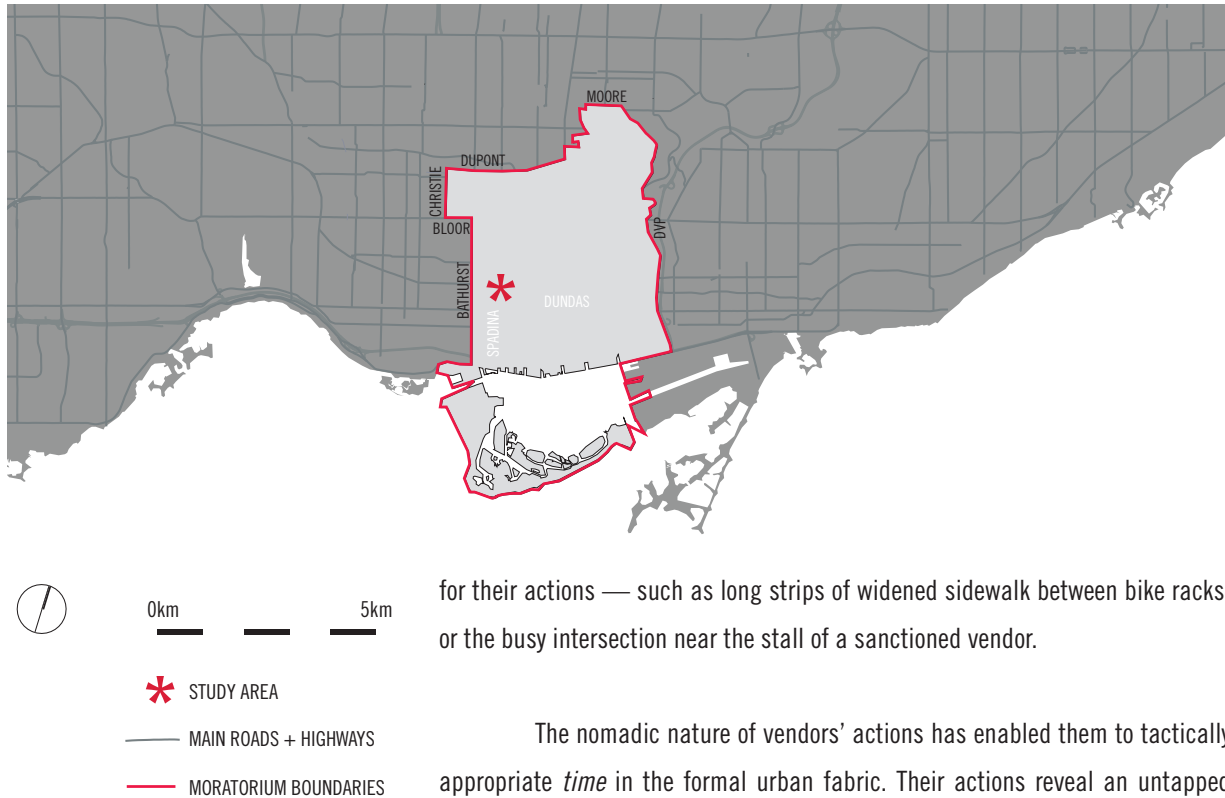
fig 5.11 Axonometric documentation —  
sidewalk to street thresholds

City regulations state that these boundaries shall not be breached for fear of impeding traffic flow — a concern similar to that voiced by Vietnamese authorities regarding the street barbers.<sup>18</sup> However, even these formal responses to the informal are breached at times by its sanctioned users.

Although nomadic by its very nature, some form or another of informal trading seems to maintain an ongoing presence here. At times, it claims underused ‘formally’ marked spaces, but in most cases, it claims its own territory amidst the various urban edges, most notably at the thresholds between building fronts and surfaces of the sidewalk and its adjacent buildings. Thresholds — both from the building to the street and the street to the curb — become crucial points of entry and exit for the mingling of informal economies with those more formal ones.

While the traces of such reclamations are almost indistinguishable when not in use, a closer look reveals a set of awaiting unconventional frames and fixtures ready to be appropriated. Quite often these *frames* are otherwise underused or invisible surfaces — ledges, front steps, doorways, garbage cans, hydro poles, bike racks, trees and tree pit fencing and other such inflections and protrusions. Upon further inspection, vendors also take advantage of smaller elements around these thresholds, such as existing conduits and handles, appropriating them from their original uses and turning them into display fixtures for wares.

Claimed in large part for their visibility and their limited or untapped potential for current use, vendors find what seem to be rather well-suited spaces



for their actions — such as long strips of widened sidewalk between bike racks, or the busy intersection near the stall of a sanctioned vendor.

The nomadic nature of vendors' actions has enabled them to tactically appropriate *time* in the formal urban fabric. Their actions reveal an untapped temporal use of urban space during sanctioned tenants' off hours, as noted by their increased presence on weekends. Most days of the week, nearby sidewalks are used in ways that are fairly contained to sidewalk edges. On Saturdays in particular, a whole host of vendors come out selling a variety of goods, as it proves to be one of the busiest days of the week for shoppers. On Sundays, however, while some vendors disappear, those who remain have learned to take claim of the semi-private commercial spaces. A bank doorway converts into an elevated

fig 5.12 Map outlining the current vending moratorium boundaries in the City of Toronto

*The City of Toronto vending moratorium has been in place since at least August 2006. It prohibits the issuing of any new street, sidewalk or boulevard vending permits. Existing permits are still accepted. Most of the informal vendors spoken to had no desire to acquire a permit regardless, despite the risk of being fined.*

space to keep goods clean on rainy days, and a nearby vestibule — not much larger than a walk-in closet — turns into a niche to keep warm, rest and chat with other vendors. A host of semi-public and private spaces that otherwise go unused expand their boundaries over the course of the day, week and season for the vendors as well as a host of other publics.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to these reinterpreted permanent elements, the urban fabric bares a different set of markings and fixtures created by the very public that use them. At times these are painted, mimicking their formal counterparts, but most often they protrude from the ground and walls. It would seem, for example, as though the same vendor who claimed the conduit pipe has added his own additional fixtures which, thanks to a little ingenuity, remain outside his supervision and await his return. Thus, the urban streetscape is reproduced and recreated by this public's performance of it, as well as added to physically, for the purpose of exchange. Despite its ephemeral nature, this *design* — well beyond architects' and planners' intentions — establishes a dialogue with the city and reflects an occurring public desire.

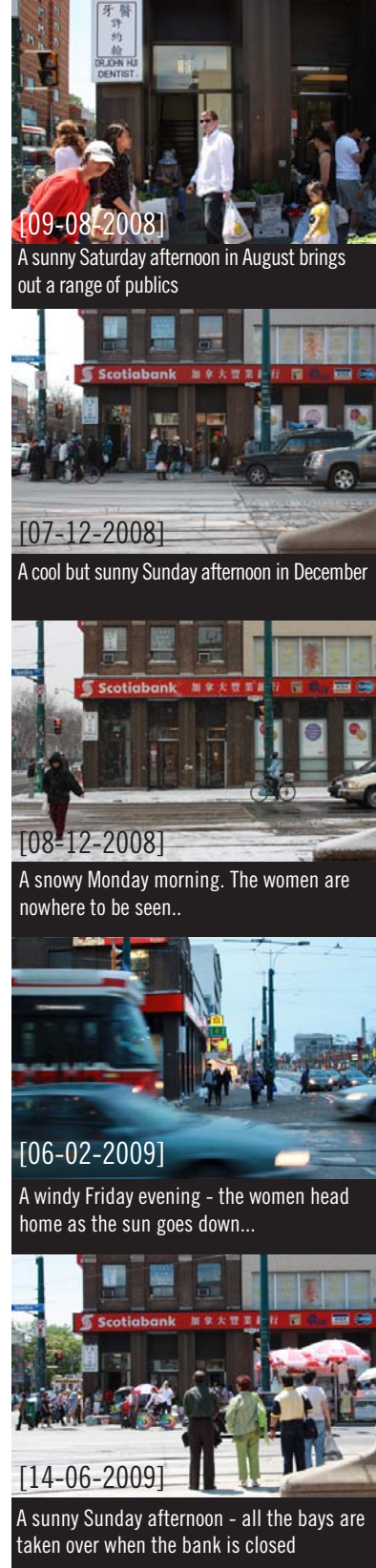


fig 5.13 Observations over the changing patterns throughout the week and the seasons

[08-10-2008]

I spotted a set of hooks one day, upon closer inspection, in and just outside an unused loading bay. Carefully camouflaged to match the jet-black stucco, they can be bought at the nearby wholesale hardware store for a couple dollars. Between these and a nearby thin electrical conduit, a whole closet of women's cotton and fleece pyjamas are quickly suspended and dismounted on busy Saturdays and Sundays. Last time I counted five different shades of pink alone.



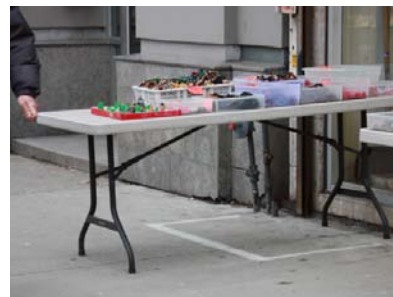
[07-12-2008]

Crevices and cracks in between and at the edges of things make excellent hiding spaces for items one might wish to retrieve later, or share with another. While to most these spaces seem like mistakes, when filled, they seem almost designed particularly for the valued contents they hold.



[07-12-2008] - Sunday

The bank's hours of operation reveal a potential space and time for nearby vendors to take over. As the bank does not have Sunday hours (and only limited hours on Saturday), vendors are able to occupy doorways and thresholds in ways that would otherwise impede pedestrian circulation into the business.



[30-01-2009]

Certain businesses have painted outdoor display boundaries outside their storefront walls and windows. A local formal measure, they look lovely in the evening when they are all the traces that remain of the day's actions. In some cases, the goods contained in the square seem at odds with what is sold in the shops beyond. Other times the lines just can't hold back all the goods as they swell over these boundaries, too.

fig 5.14 Exchange — collection 1



[14-05-2009]

Affixing fake trees to real ones (as well as to sign posts and other such street infrastructures) seems to be increasingly common practice along the street's edge. Over the winter months, they appear to grow right out of the curbside snow banks.



[15-09-2008]

Early morning, usually before I can get to site, the day's events begin at the curb. Before any stores open, young men sit on tables anxiously awaiting the goods, enjoying a bit of downtime before the day begins.



One by one, vans of various sizes pull up for their deliveries. The first carries baskets of buns for the Vietnamese sandwich shop.

[08-12-2008]

As it is a snowy January morning, most of the vendors have not arrived yet today, and may not at all. Not even the larger ones that nestle into their painted boundaries. In an attempt to track at least one down, I approach a nearby merchant setting up.



"Do you know if they'll be out today?"  
I say, as I point to the intersection.

*"Oh no, but you can ask up the street, where she parks."* Where she parks? I ask.

As I approach the side lane next to the grocery store, I spot what may be the cart — a modified hot dog stand. Wrapped in giant tarps and racks, I can make out the women's underwear with 'Made in China' tags pressed up against a clearer section.



*fig 5.15 Threshold 3 — building edge to sidewalk*





fig 5.16 Threshold 4 — building edge to sidewalk



*fig 5.17 Threshold 5 — claiming space  
in a shadow*



*fig 5.18* Threshold 6 — trespassing?

## BLIND FIELD

## SPATIAL

## OPERATIONAL

INITIATOR:

elderly asian women

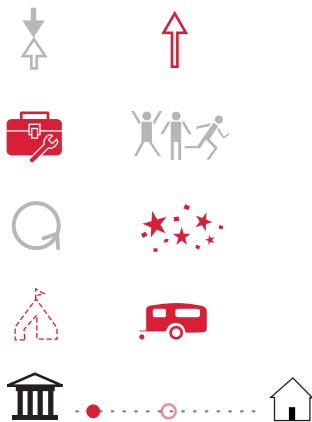
PARTICIPANTS:

elderly asian women, vietnamese women,  
some elderly chinese men

While formal edges and thresholds form a field of spatial possibilities for exchange, other material goods — either left over from formal exchange and production nearby or produced by the vendors themselves — reveal a different field of architectural props and exchange practices.

The informal groups of elderly, female Asian sidewalk merchants are a habitual and interesting vending public. While not all of them possess direct formal ties or official claims on the nearby spaces, their collective presence seems to strengthen their visibility as an informal community amidst the formal ethnic community in Chinatown. Based on discussions with local merchants, and with the women themselves,<sup>20</sup> it would seem as though most came over from China in the mid-1970s or later.<sup>21</sup>

Nearby merchants respectfully refer to them as 老 華 橋, or *Lo Hua Q* — literally meaning *Old Asian Bridge* — implying they have immigrated from China and resided in Canada for quite some time.<sup>22</sup> At the time of their arrival, a minimum of formal infrastructures existed for these women and for others from ethnic communities to integrate themselves into predominant publics.<sup>23</sup> Therefore,



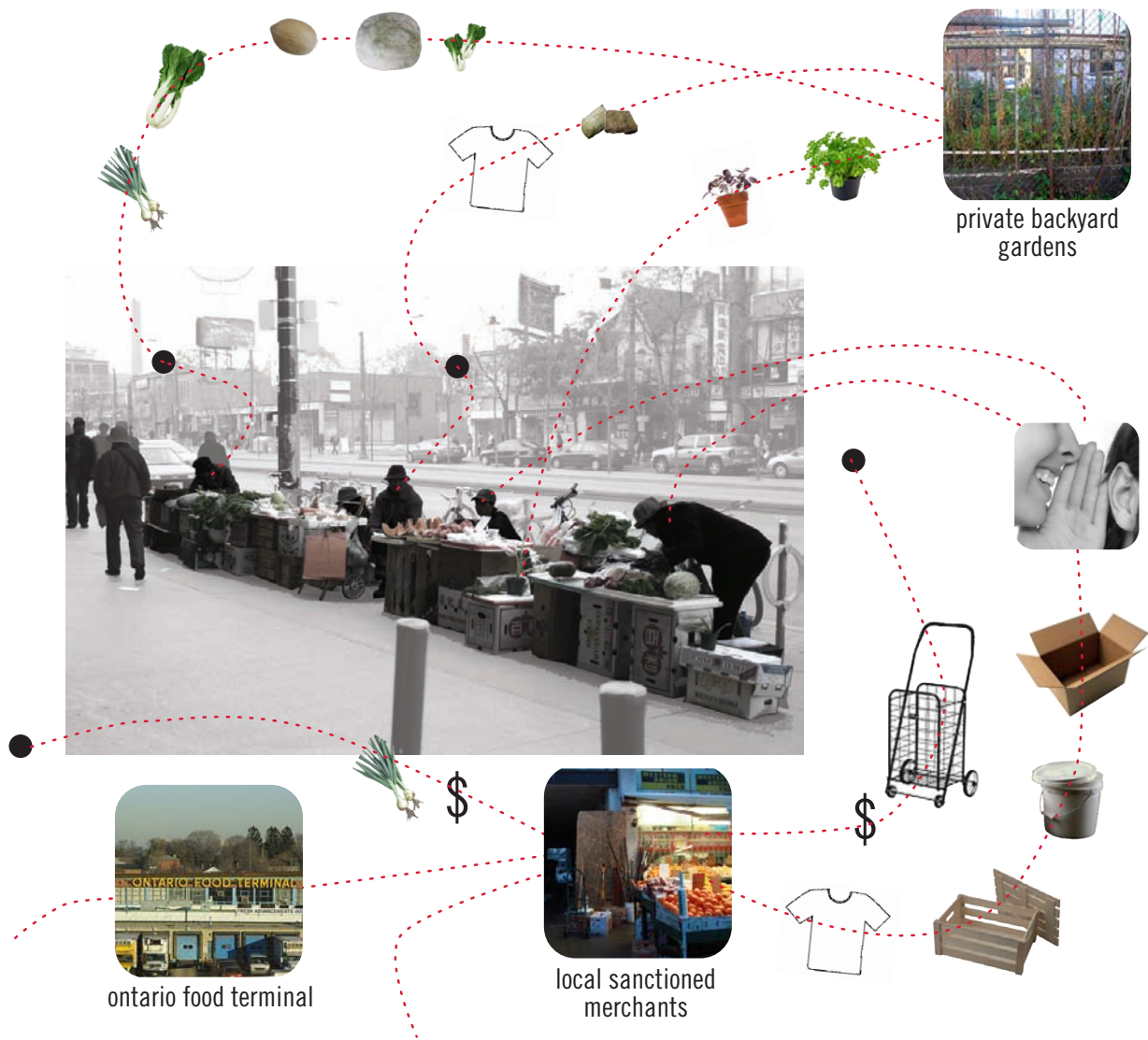


fig 5.19 The practice of temporary informal street vending in Toronto's Chinatown and some of the myriad forces which contribute to its spatial production





they seem to have largely relied on individual and collective ingenuity to claim spaces to grow, purchase and vend their goods, allowing them to participate in social and economic exchange along the street. Not always faring well with local authorities and regulations, they do not assume to insert themselves seamlessly in any formal system. For example, they avoid repercussions by taking their actions temporarily into nearby private spaces — proving their tactical strength in conditions where they may be perceived as weak. Thus, they have found clever means of operating, allowing them to assert what Henri Lefebvre refers to as their *right to the city*.

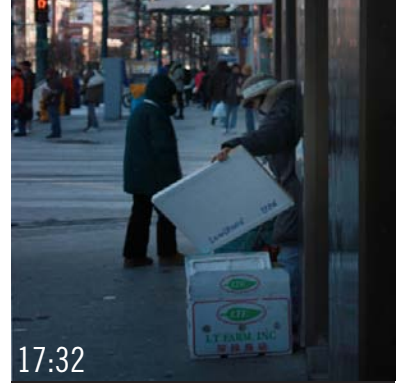
In addition to reclaiming urban space and time, the older female vendors have also learned to ingeniously appropriate the remnants of formal

*fig 5.20 Material and spatial adaptation  
— strength in numbers.*

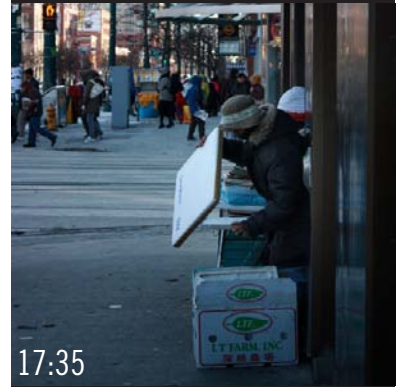
*A row of older asian sidewalk vendors. They appropriate the space otherwise aloted for bike racks, placing themselves in front of, beside and in between the racks and bikes and combine a variety of materials to create a comfortable environment to spend the day socializing with fellow vendors*

nearby economies to assist them in their exchanges. Displaying ingenuity and resourcefulness, they transform objects of formal commerce into items for containment, transport, display and furnishing. The resulting micro-architectures are adaptable, transportable and, in many respects, tailored to their needs and specifications. The preferred materials of choice appear to be the most common ones: the personal shopping cart and the produce box. While there are tendencies and patterns of use, closer inspection reveals that vendors seem to adapt these simple frames to their particular needs.

The goods exchanged, in certain cases, are also reclaimed or reused. While many vendors tend to sell items they grow (mostly during the summer months) or make (all year round) themselves, one can often find amidst these piles of plants and sticky rice the occasional piece of second-hand clothing or formally vended items exchanged with nearby merchants. Ultimately, this seems to reflect Laguerre's comments introducing this section, noting the interrelation between formal and informal economies.



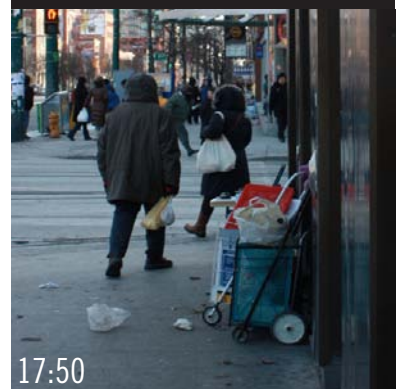
17:32



17:35



17:40



17:50

fig 5.21 Packing up at the end of the day

[30-11-2008]

*Material exchange* — goods seem to be in a constant state of exchange on Spadina. One body's waste is truly revalued by another. The cardboard box is an amazingly versatile infrastructure. I can contain, stack, display and dismantle all over the course of a day, only to be put out at the curb and reclaimed for another round of use in time before the Monday morning truck comes to take it out of the system.

Not nearly as common as boxes and shopping carts, the pail seems to be revalued in a number of different ways. There is a woman who seems to alternate between using hers as a vending stand, a chair and a wastebasket.



[08-12-2008]

*Economic exchanges* — my unsuccessful winter attempts at communicating with the vendors have prompted a new strategy: attempt to strike up a conversation over the purchase of sticky rice. Most of the vendors who do choose to come out during the winter months seem to sell a variation thereof. Wrapped in banana leaves and tied with string, they bear striking resemblance to those sold at a nearby bakery and sandwich store. One woman assures me she made them fresh her in kitchen. Another just shakes her head when I ask her where they come from, and I fear something is lost in translation.



[03-11-2007]

*Cultural exchanges* — in Paris, it seemed as though most people had a shopping cart. *Aller au Marche* was a habitual pedestrian practice that required such a device. Some were quite utilitarian, whereas others seemed carefully crafted and detailed, in soft, lovely poly-blend fabrics.



fig 5.22 Exchange — collection 2: building to sidewalk and sidewalk to street

In Toronto, I rarely see them outside of Chinatown, but they are lovely there too.



[ 30-01-2009 ]

*Global exchanges — 老華橋, or Lo Hua Q, literally meaning old Asian bridge, is the term used by a local fruit merchant when I asked what he knew about the women. I am told the term respectfully refers to one who has emigrated from China and resided in Canada for quite some time.*

*Do you pity them?* he asked.

No, no, I just want to talk to them

*You shouldn't pity them. They are rich, you know. They have sons and daughters; doctors and lawyers." he says. His friend confirms this with a nod.*

A bank teller across from where they vend gave another story. *"They are out there when the weather is nicer. They keep to themselves. They make things, so they have something to do, try to sell them, and go home to their families when they've had enough for the day."*

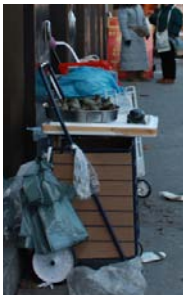
[14-06-2009]

*Information exchanges — my most recent attempts at talking to the vendors have been more successful, though I've concluded that pulling out the camera seems to undo this bond rather quickly. Last weekend, I asked the vendor across from the bank if I might photograph her potted plants and sticky rice. She smiled politely and quickly shook her head no.*

*"There is someone taking photographs and giving them to the city. They charged a friend a fine of \$500.00...I can't afford that."*

Would you consider getting a permit?

*"No, I just sell vegetables, from my garden. A permit is too much for me... Would you like to buy some lemon balm?"*





*fig 5.23    Material adaptations — a  
modified baby carriage holds cold goods*



*fig 5.24 Finding hiding spots in the residual spaces of formal merchants' structures*

What arises from closer observation and speculation on these women's practices is that their actions seem to be more socially than economically motivated.<sup>24</sup> They carry a limited selection of goods for barter, and there are days when I suspect they may not even sell any at all.<sup>25</sup> Of interest, though, is the *relational* public space that is produced through their physical and social participation in and around the sidewalk's edges. For a number of them, the space seems to be a collective informal public territory that allows them to participate in more intimate and subtle ways within a community. With minimal or no fixed form or built presence, they temporarily and habitually appropriate the often overlooked spatial and material fields of Spadina Avenue.

Taking advantage of Spadina's particularly wide section and complex and layered thresholds, the vendors both assist in the temporary redesign of the street and, in turn, the practice of street vending is recalibrated to suit the urban spaces in question. Engaging in this constantly shifting dialogue, these urban actors seem able to negotiate their needs with most of their surrounding publics and infrastructures.

This case of exchange in Toronto is a particular cultural practice which has endured for quite some time along Spadina Avenue, but may soon bear witness to change once more. The city's current vending moratorium is part of a larger set of actions involved in formally rethinking temporary vending in the city.<sup>26</sup> In light of this, as well as larger migration patterns, other means towards street exchange are emerging, leading much informal exchange to relocate to the newer, inner

urban edges of the city. Where some are finding new ways of reconceiving these suburban arterial edges, outside the vending moratorium, others are rethinking and standardizing the structures and tools used for exchange along more central public thresholds. Thus, as certain, more formal urban actors move in and take ownership of these revalued public spaces, another more informal set take flight towards a new field at the fringes between Toronto old and new.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*





*fig 5.25 Toronto 'a la cart' new standardized sidewalk and public square vending structures promoting culturally diverse foods downtown*



*fig 5.26 The strip along Lawrence Avenue where informal vendors pull up vans and sell flags and towels between the edge of the private parking lots and the public sidewalk*

## Endnotes

- 1 Michel S. Laguerre, *Informal City* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 73.
- 2 John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism*, Expanded ed. (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 34.
- 3 Quoted from an interview with a bank teller who observes the Chinatown vendors daily from her desk.
- 4 Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, "Reading Urban Economies: Globalization" in *Blackwell City Reader* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 111
- 5 Laguerre, *Informal City*, 73.
- 6 Melanie Lidman, "In an effort to the city's look, new law may trim curb side haircuts," Phillip Merrill College of Journalism, Dateline Merrill special Report, 2008, <<http://www.usingmedia.com/vietnam/barbers.html>> (accessed May 16 2009).
- 7 Based on personal observations, many of these informal merchants were young immigrant men and slightly older women.
- 8 Bangkok Day Trips, "Market on the Railway Tracks," Photo Stories by Richard Barrow, <http://www.bangkok-daytrips.com/maeklong-railway.html> (accessed February 16, 2008).
- 9 Chase, Crawford and Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism*, 30.
- 10 Ibid, 34.
- 11 Mark Abrahamson, *Global Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48; John Lorinc, *New City: How the Crisis in Canada's Urban Centres is Reshaping the Nation* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2006), 58.
- 12 Sophie Watson, *City Publics : The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 166
- 13 Ibid. 172.
- 14 Ibid, 41 .
- 15 Ibid, 166.
- 16 Toronto Municipal Code, "Chapter 313: Streets and Sidewalks," and "Chapter 315: Street Vending", (Toronto, 1995), 313.44.1, 313.44.2.
- 17 Toronto Municipal Code, "Chapter 313: Streets and Sidewalks," (Toronto, 1995), 313.13.
- 18 Toronto Municipal Code, "Chapter 313: Streets and Sidewalks" and "Chapter 315: Street Vending," (Toronto, 1995), 313. 2, 315.10
- 19 Based on field research, at times homeless men appropriate local banks' automatic teller foyers, as both common and at times private space, the vestibule is also a warm place to sleep on colder nights, and a place to wait and meet people.
- 20 Based on interview with one of the fruit vendors at a 'formal' shop near one of the often frequented vending sites, January 30 2009, (translation by Jessica Cheung).
- 21 Richard Henry Thompson, *Toronto's Chinatown: The Changing Social Organization of an Ethnic Community* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 154.



- 22 Based on interview with one of the fruit vendors at a 'formal' shop near one of the often frequented vending sites, January 30 2009, (translation by Jessica Cheung)
- 23 Thompson, *Toronto's Chinatown: The Changing Social Organization of an Ethnic*, 142.
- 24 Upon speaking with local vendors, it would seem as though these women have children, grandchildren, nearby homes to return to and in some cases may have had jobs in and around the neighbourhood at some point. Street vending becomes a collective activity for them to socialize, keep occupied and 'resourceful', and make a bit of money for themselves.
- 25 based on a personal observations over the course of somewhat busy days between October 2007 and May 2009.
- 26 Toronto 'a la cart' program description, cart locations and cart specifications <<http://www.toronto.ca/alacart/>>.
- 27 Donovan Vincent, "New Street Food: Ready, Set, Munch" in *Toronto Star*, May 15, 2009 <<http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/634704>> (accessed June 01 2009) ; Kaori Furue, "Toronto a la Cart's First Thirty Days" in Torontoist e-newsfeed June 24 2009, <[http://torontoist.com/2009/06/toronto\\_a\\_la\\_cart\\_first\\_thirty\\_days.php](http://torontoist.com/2009/06/toronto_a_la_cart_first_thirty_days.php)> (accessed June 28 2009)

## 6.0 CULTIVATE



The more a person surveys the world in an open, uninhibited spirit, the more he or she becomes involved in it as a critic and actor...One of the meanings of “cultivation” is to grow what did not exist before in a wild state. For the Enlightenment social writers, the great example of this was the world of work... by rationally cultivating and shaping even these menial forms of labour, the worker might become a deeper, more complex human being.<sup>1</sup>

RICHARD SENNETT

Like a virulent plant, [Guerrilla Gardening] has sprung up whenever the environmental conditions of society have been conducive to it. Like seeds blowing from one patch to flower in another nearby, guerrilla gardens grow and adapt to local conditions and in time take on new characteristics, almost like new species of a genus.<sup>2</sup>

RICHARD REYNOLDS

*“Originally, I got involved for the simple reason that I had no place to garden. I live in an apartment building. I don’t have a backyard. This way I do something good for the city too, while I am at it... But it’s great when the local area adopts the space itself...The City can’t do everything.”<sup>3</sup>*

Terry & JT (Toronto Guerrilla Gardeners)



*fig 6.1     Draining the 'Secret Garden'*

[05-05-2008]

After getting lost twice, we pulled up next to the old Coffee Time and my ride agrees to meet me back here in about two hours.

*"Are you sure we are still even in Toronto?"* she asks jokingly. I close the door and she drove off, back downtown.

Despite the delays, I am still a little early, and head towards a group of women who have started to gather by the old Coffee Time sign. One of them, firmly holding her clipboard, confirms that this is indeed it. We're just waiting on a few more. In the meantime, I should have a slice of orange and help myself to some water from the cooler by the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"...and catch a sneak a peak at a secret garden built over the years by an anonymous newcomer..."*

These words in the write-up for the day's Jane's Walk were what drew me here on an early Sunday afternoon in May.<sup>4</sup> *How is it still a secret if they advertise it like this?* I thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

The walk finally underway, we approach the cemetery. The woman with the clipboard goes to great lengths to accurately explain the history of the most significant lots. A second woman, a little older with good walking shoes, pulls me aside and reassures me *"Wait 'til you see the water, it's quite peaceful and the garden is huge! I really hope he is there."* *Who is he?* I thought.

Part of the local neighbourhood walking club, she and other walkers meet every

Sunday at the Coffee Time and head out to different parts of the neighbourhood together. “*The best stops along the way are the gardens,*” she says. There is a community garden under the housing towers by the flats, and some smaller separate gardens in people’s backyards that you can make out through chain-link fences. Her favourite and most recent discovery, though, is the ‘secret garden.’

*“It’s not really a secret, but it is best not to tell too many people about it. I don’t imagine he’s allowed to use the land like that. I think if the City knew, they might make him pay a fine, or just take it down entirely.”* I ask how close we are. *“Just a little farther down.”*

We slide through a small break in the fence, grab the rope tied around some trees and head down into the ravine.

*“There are other ways, but this is the fastest.”*

After passing quite a bit of brush, broken tree branches and some graffitied rocks, we get to a clearing and a nearby highway overpass bridge. I suppose I’m not really sure what I expected to find. Some stakes wrapped in orange snow fencing, sheltering a few bean sprouts or perennials? It was still early spring, after all.

Instead what stood before us looked more like an engineering marvel. At points it became difficult to decipher where the trees ended, and where the makeshift fenceposts began. A padlock on its door kept kids — and Sunday morning walkers — out, but you could still decipher through the cracks what was growing beyond: some chives and plenty of onions. No sooner did I question how this was all maintained, when I spotted further downriver a black pipe coming out of the water and poking through one of the branch walls. Below where I stood lay a similar pipe carrying a faint trickle moving any excess water back to the river to be washed away.



*fig 6.2 The 'Secret Garden' and its surrounding boundaries on the edge of Toronto's Humber River*





## DEFINITIONS & MOTIVATIONS OF INFORMAL CULTIVATION

Cultivation, one of many forms of urban production, is a crucial part of what makes and maintains urban society. Rendering the urban landscape productive has played a large part in developing communities — tracing back to the establishment of original settlements<sup>5</sup> — as well as ensuring their economic and social maintenance. While industrialization of cultivation practices have arguably shifted this more social relationship to one of work for capital, a more fundamental approach to the term and the urban actor's involvement in its processes reveals that cultivation has deeper political roots than one would first assume.

As Richard Sennett explains, cultivation implies more than simply nurturing some seeds, or the more laborious industrial task of raising crops. In the broadest sense of the term, to cultivate is to foster the growth of —or to care for — something or someone, by means of personal labour.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the term cultivate is considered here in this sense as the maintenance of both plants and people as part of a larger civic urban landscape.

The reasons for informally appropriating and rendering urban space productive — illicitly or otherwise — vary depending on the intentions of the urban actors involved. While some informal cultivation, like *Guerrilla Gardening*, is motivated by ideological intentions, other spatial reclamations arise out of needs like social sustenance and food security. In most (if not all) cases, the cultivation of urban land that is not privately owned tends to lie outside or at the edges



of formal economies. What is often required to garden illicitly is the willingness to appropriate wilder or underproductive urban blind fields. To this effect, an existing bounded container is usually found, appropriated and repurposed, or if no structures are available, a set of new edges are produced — as in the case of the riverbank ‘secret garden’ discussed earlier. This creation of a boundary delimits the area being transformed from its previous state of ‘urban wilderness.’

Another fundamental difference between informal and formal cultivation is in the acquisition and deployment of *resources* within and the *valuation* of the space produced. In the case of resources, informal production deals most often in ‘sweat’ rather than economic equity: individuals or collectives directly participate with a space, transforming it at relatively low material and labour costs. This form of equity often profits from local and willing physical, intellectual and in some cases artistic labour and traditions. This expands the garden’s valuation outside formal consumptive measures, offering an implicit critique of the site’s current mode of operation.

## SITUATING INFORMAL URBAN CULTIVATION

Informally appropriating urban space to grow food (and flowers) has a longstanding tradition as an ideological act. Taking direct action upon the landscape as a form of protest has been a means of asserting collective rights to food and land beyond the limits of private ownership.

The first recorded attempts at this “illicit cultivation of someone else’s land”<sup>7</sup> began in seventeenth century England with a group of dissenters calling themselves the Diggers.<sup>8</sup> As political historian Geoff Kennedy notes,

“Advocating an anti-capitalist ideology and a communal form of organization, the Diggers were committed to a radical project of social and economic reform that would see the earth restored to its original condition as a ‘common treasury’ of communal property, albeit in a progressive non-traditional way.”<sup>9</sup>



Eventually persecuted for their actions, the Diggers temporarily seized public land, growing food for the poorer classes, and became “the first communist movement that espoused a proletarian ideology.”<sup>10</sup>

Claming the Diggers as inspiration, a group of university students calling themselves the ‘Robin Hood Commission’ undertook an act of civil disobedience which eventually led to the formation of People’s Park. In the spring of 1969, this group of UC Berkley students seized a plot of vacant land owned by the school, tearing down its surrounding fences and putting down sod, planting bushes and trees, and in particular, cultivating a set of communal garden plots.<sup>11</sup> For the students, the garden represented a kind of miniature Utopia that symbolically challenged a number of social, political and environmental ills of the time.<sup>12</sup> With the lofty ambitions of reprogramming larger political and social structures through ‘agrarian reform,’ both the Diggers and the Robin Hood Commission took action through direct engagement with the urban landscape. Both broke down established private-public barriers and redrew them to suit the élan of the time.

fig 6.3 Engraving of Gerard Winstanley  
— one of the first ‘Diggers’

As the Diggers were eventually persecuted by the state for their actions, so too did the UC Berkeley fight back on multiple occasions to develop the land claimed by the Robin Hood Commission. While the park was eventually formalized (but still under the deed of the university), over time the lack of maintenance and the disappearance of the 1960s élan has led to the park's current, rather unfortunate state.<sup>13</sup> For Mitchell, this brings up an important point in the nature of *found* public space, whereby “the political importance of the park as a public space rests on its status as a *taken* space.”<sup>14</sup> People's Park's longstanding looseness has led to certain publics feeling uneasy about occupying the space; the ‘openness’ seems to currently attract the city's homeless population and detract from the current generation of students now that the ‘hippies’ have gone.

A similar tactical cultivation — with slightly differing results — emerged shortly after in New York's Lower East Side. Neighbourhood tenement buildings were suffering from what had been deemed ‘benign neglect’ on behalf of the city. An increasing amount of urban lots were being vacated, burnt down or simply abandoned by owners, and in their place garbage and rubble accumulated.<sup>15</sup> While the 1960s saw some of these lots developed into vest pocket parks, many of these also fell into disrepair or were vandalized — not reflecting the needs and desires of the local community in their hard design.<sup>16</sup>

In the spring of 1973, amidst this landscape of disrepair, a group calling themselves the ‘Green Guerrillas’ began to take action. Led by artist and activist Elizabeth ‘Lizy’ Christie, the group's first responses to the urban blight



fig 6.4 Planting undertaken by the ‘Robin Hood Commission’ and other volunteers at People's Park

fig 6.5 Laying down sod at ‘People's Park’



were tactical ones. While some of the projects undertaken by Christie and the Green Guerrillas were fairly benign, such as hanging planter boxes on apartment window ledges and empty tree pits, others were more subversive, such as the practice of throwing ‘seed bombs’.<sup>17</sup> Within weeks, the preliminary signs of a green invasion began to appear all over neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side, Bushwick and the South Bronx. However, this benign form of trespassing was only the beginning.

The spurts of green amidst the rubble garnered enough attention to encourage local community members to assist in de-fencing and appropriating these lots. The first of their conquests was a 300-by-50-foot lot at the corner of Bowery and Houston. In a matter of weeks, Christie and the local community transformed it into productive urban agricultural plots and other public amenities.<sup>18</sup> These actions led to the group’s transformation into a not-for-profit organization which helped others take action on similar vacant lots across the city. Over the next ten years, residents increasingly took action on their neighbourhood ‘dumping grounds,’ reclaiming and transforming nearby vacant lots. The New York *Neighbourhood Open Space Coalition* states, “What the City was unable to provide for its people, the communities have created for themselves.”<sup>19</sup>

Eventually a large number of the gardens gained (mostly temporary) legitimate status — the first being the Green Guerrilla’s plot at Bowery and Houston. Implied in the gardens’ legitimization was the City’s commitment to take responsibility of the owner-abandoned lots, renting them to various community groups at a negligible formality fee of \$1 per year. While these contracts eventually

*fig 6.6 Overtaking and tilling the soil of an abandoned lot at Bowery and Houston*

*fig 6.7 Lizzy Christie in the Garden at Bowery and Houston*

proved insecure once development re-emerged in many of the neighbourhoods, the gardens were a valuable addition to the urban public realm of New York City and were largely instigated, produced and maintained by the very public that used them.

In 1985, the Coalition prepared a study that counted 448 converted abandoned lots and other urban infrastructures that became gardens, tended to by over 11,000 people. At the time, this accounted for 23% of all parks in the city of New York.<sup>20</sup> Over the years, some professionals such as horticulturalists, landscape architects and architects got involved in their development and maintenance. However, rather than have experts provide optimal solutions or aesthetic choices, the gardening efforts have still been largely a public effort, allowing participants to learn and experiment directly with their public realm through making it themselves.

\* \* \* \* \*



*fig 6.8 New York Gardener 'Purple' and one of his many abandoned lot gardening efforts spread over many acres of abandoned lots in the city*

*The most notable of Purple's gardens is the 15000 square foot 'Garden of Eden,' begun in 1975. It was cleared out by the city in phases, and finally disappeared completely on Januray 8th 1986*

## BLIND FIELD

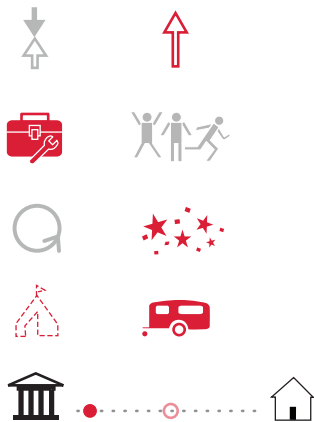
## SPATIAL

## OPERATIONAL

INITIATORS: Lizzy Christie and the 'Green Guerrillas'

PARTICIPANTS: young activists who like to garden, graffiti artists, political science students, librarians, office workers, artists...

Since the 1970s, the actions undertaken in New York have provided a relevant precedent for others with the drive to seek out and affect their own urban landscapes' productivity. Particularly, the evolution of 'seed bombing' as a tactical means of affecting and drawing attention to urban blight has spread, and in recent years has been on the rise. Relatively simple to make, the propagation of this 'arsenal' has evolved from its typewritten 1970s pamphlets. Through various online forums, like-minded individuals can access instructional videos freely, as well as locate other people in their own cities interested in undertaking these actions.<sup>21</sup> This enables almost anyone with access to materials wishing to undertake their own operations upon urban blight to do so with relative ease. The creativity in the operation rests for the most part in one's renewed view of the urban landscape for alternate spaces to cultivate.



Toronto is one of many cities with a growing group of young 'activists' wishing to engage these small acts of disobedience around their neighbourhoods. Since 2001 the Toronto Public Space Committee (T.P.S.C.) established a *Guerrilla Gardening* chapter.<sup>22</sup> Coordinators operate in the four quarters of the city (uptown, downtown, east end and west end) with a relatively simple mandate: "without permit



fig 6.9 The practice of Guerrilla Gardening - in particular seed bombing - in a vacant lot in Toronto's East end and some of the forces and tools contributing to its spatial production





or license, we plant seeds and seedlings in all those neglected corners of public space. Join us as we vandalise the city with nature!”<sup>23</sup>

While their affiliation with the T.P.S.C. has rendered them slightly more formal,\* the illicit gardeners’ means of operating are still largely tactical in their acquisition of tools, planting materials and labour — operating entirely on personal ‘blind’ donations.\*\* The coordinators typically bring the basic agents/tools — soil and watering cans — while volunteers are encouraged to bring whatever they can.\*\*\*

\* According to 2006-2008 season coordinator, since their inception, meetings for the T.P.S.C. are held free of charge at Toronto’s City Hall (interview: April 07 2009)

\*\* According to 2009 season coordinator, the TPSC refuses to accept public corporate sponsorship on the basis of its infringement on public space.

\*\*\* Over the course of the plantings I witnessed, nearby businesses were more than willing to fill up watering cans in case the gardeners ran out.

fig 6.10 Richard Reynolds’ map of Guerrilla Gardening ‘hot spots’ around the world — Reynolds counts 87 cities that actively practice illicit gardening



A couple days before the planting is set, emails are dispatched to everyone who has joined the *Guerrilla Gardener* mailing list with details such as location, time and suggested donations.

The Toronto Guerrilla Gardeners meet about seven times per season — once to plan and name coordinators for each of the four sections of the city, once to make seed bombs, another time shortly thereafter to throw them, and the rest of the meetings are for plantings at sites identified in each section of the city. Despite this structure, the 2008 season's coordinator stresses that an important aim is for other gardeners to be inspired to undertake similar actions, as well as for community members to appropriate and maintain the gardens once the gardeners have left. He even recounts the following situation of unexpected appropriation by a local community member:

We planted in a particular site the year before, and when we came back the following year, a man accused us of taking his space. It would seem as though he had taken over the space after we had left, and had maintained it himself. . . . The space wasn't officially his — or ours, of course — but now he felt we were crossing his turf. Which I guess is probably ideal, but certainly created a bizarre situation at the time.<sup>24</sup>

The exception more than the rule, such cases nevertheless seem to justify the time and energy spent on such speculative work.

\* \* \* \* \*

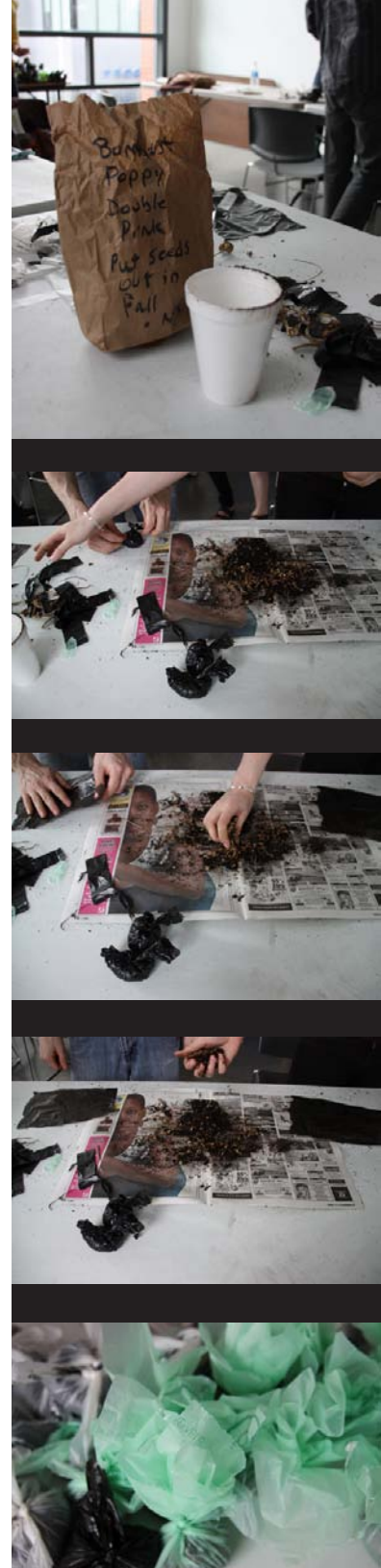


fig 6.11 The process of making seed bombs — a seed bomb making session at a Toronto community centre in March 2009

[11-05-2009]

*Where* — corner of King and Queen E...

*When* — 7pm Thursday May 14

*Who* — You and anyone that you can mobilize!

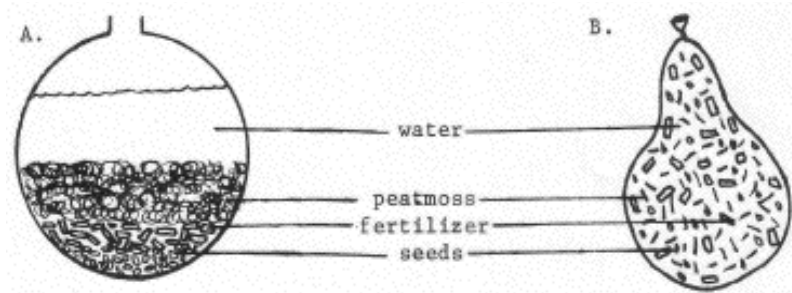
*What* — Bring warm gloves, your camera, and your bike if you have one — if not there will be walkers.

- T.P.S.C. e-mailing list message

[1973]

The seed bomb has played an important role in the spread and evolution of Guerrilla Gardening. Two variations — using either a balloon or a Christmas ornament, both expected to break on impact — were designed by the Green Guerrillas and illustrated on leaflets. Suggested throwing instructions: *“For Christmas ornaments, use an underhand throw; for water balloons, use an overhand throw. Observe all normal precautions...”*

- Green Guerrilla Pamphlet



[2006]

A Toronto Artist 'Posterchild' has been undertaking her own Guerrilla Gardening, affixing boxes onto laneway walls and telephone poles across the city of Toronto since 2006. Although the live plants did not last long, the artist recently noticed they had been replaced by slightly more resilient counterparts.

- artist's website



[25-04-2008]

London Guerrilla Gardener Richard Reynolds' instructions on how to make hard sun-dried seed bombs are posted on guerrillagardening.org and disseminated online through a variety of other sources. They avoid the waste that balloons and Christmas ornaments leave behind, but take a good rainfall to germinate.

- YouTube



fig 6.12 Cultivate — collection 1

[04-05-2009]

Upon entering the small community room, I am greeted by Terry, who hands me a couple of corn-based 'biodegradable doggie bags' and points out an open spot near bags of soil, sand and seeds.

*"This way, the whole thing disintegrates within a couple weeks. By that time, the poppies should have sprouted!"*

-Terry (Guerrilla Gardener, Toronto)



[2004]

Artists Christopher Humes and Noah Scalin have designed their own version of the seed bomb. Entitled 'plant the piece', the seed bomb is cast in the shape of a 9mm gun. It has been displayed at galleries in Montreal and Sweden, and can be purchased from the artists' website for US\$50. According to the artists, it uses a recipe developed by Japanese philosopher and 'radical gardener' Masanobu Fukuoka, who claimed:

*"The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings."*

- artists' website

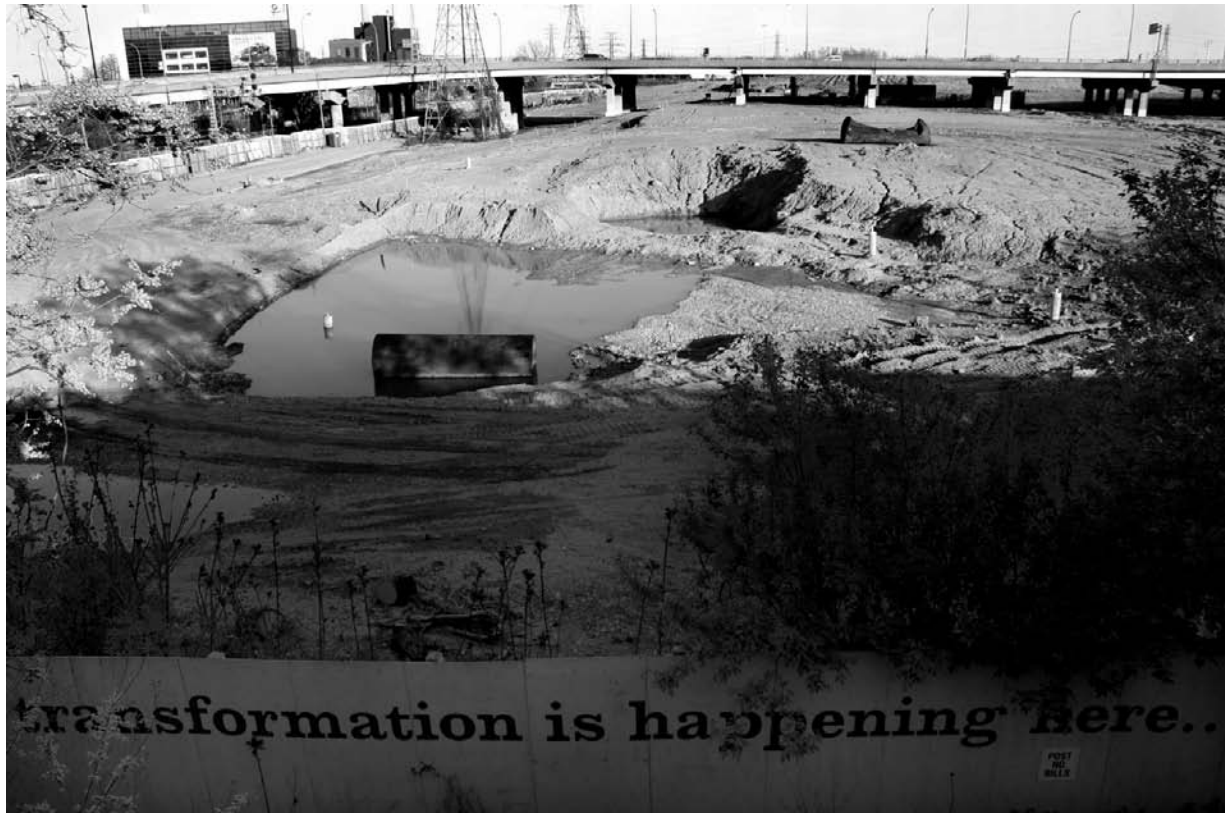


[1979]

The Guerrilla Gardeners took action six years after Guerrilla fighter Che Guevara's execution. Aware of the importance of mobilizing young urbanites in a peaceful war against urban blight, the equation of a terminology of rebellion was crucial to the fight. So has the evocation of rebellious imagery. The LA Guerrilla Gardening group, for example, appropriates Banksy's famed 'Flower Thrower' — an appropriation of artist Susan Meisela's 'Molotov Man.' As the idea of Guerrilla Gardening continues to spread, its individual members find new forms to appropriate, including sporting City worker uniforms.

- R Reynolds (guerrilla gardener, London)





*fig 6.13 East end Seed Bombing — A 'not so empty' lot selected out of convenience and desire for temporary change rather than long term cultivation goals. The massive waterfront site is being redeveloped over the next 20 years by the City of Toronto*



*fig 6.14 East End Seed Bombing —  
releasing the ammunitions*



*fig 6.15 West End planting — trespassing and reclaiming*



*fig 6.16 Downtown planting — finishing up and watering just before disbanding*



Rather than ask for permission, the actors undertake these actions for the purpose of protest and urban amelioration — taking the urban landscape's maintenance into their own hands. Alternately, there are other similar practices which utilize limited but fertile land resources and tap into pre-existing infrastructures ripe to be reclaimed. While they may serve as an implicit spatial critique — combining a variety of uses traditional zoning would not foresee or allow — this point is secondary to their appropriation for the sake of food security and social sustenance.

Unlike the generally attention-seeking practices of the Guerrilla Gardeners, urban agriculture in the margins often goes unnoticed by those who aren't looking for them. Quite often, the urban actors undertaking such cultivation tend to prefer it that way. At times this cultivation is without permission, but this is not a prerequisite. For personal or collective gain, such cultivation requires ingenuity and a willingness to look across the urban field at spaces often overlooked as potentially productive. When looked at more carefully urban cultivation participates in a shift of perception for both its participants and those who witness the practice.

Nowhere is this more evident and extreme than in Japan's dense urban landscape. Rather than taking over private spaces which run a high risk of being overtaken (and are often initially unavailable) for their high development value, planting takes place in untapped blind fields such as the tiny green traffic islands installed by the City. Minimally planted by the City, these islands have become

increasingly appropriated as a productive substitute for personal home garden plots; they are built up with potted plants, or make use of small patches of existing soil to grow. Some grow edibles, while most grow flowers and greenery.

These small cultivation plots create thresholds and offer moments of repose in the dense, hard-surfaced city, rendering visible and increasingly productive an otherwise underutilized dispersed resource. This case shares similarities with the first garden encountered early in the research next to the Toronto river's edge: both invisible to certain eyes, but ripe with potential to others. In the Japanese case, however, rather than tame a 'wilder zone,' a perfectly visible urban *container* is a crucial spatial blind field which, when exposed to re-programming for cultivation, reveals a ripe spatial type to overtake and reprogram at will.

At a scalar extreme to these small, dispersed infrastructures, New York's Highline project was a massive, singular, continuous one. Sitting two stories above the ground, and running a total length of 2.33 km, the Highline occupies what was once a spatial blind field — an elevated railway track out of commission since 1980.<sup>25</sup> When a group of local property owners wanted to demolish the property in the mid 1980s, local activists stepped in and the elevated track remained.

Between that time and its current redeveloped state, its length slowly transformed into an urban wilderness of sorts, an elevated *space of uncertainty*<sup>26</sup> or *architecture of transgression*.<sup>27</sup> Local plant species began to reappropriate the



fig 6.17 Cultivating tomatoes and lavender in a narrow traffic median on a residential street in Tokyo

fig 6.18 Further down the median, a variety of pots are crowded onto the median maximizing the usefulness — and personalization — of the space



fig 6.19 A Christmas Tree on the Highline prior to the line's redevelopment

fig 6.20 A view of wildflowers and grasses growing down the Highline

tracks, as well as local urban gardeners, youth and others seeking an alternate public space to the other more 'designed' ones that the city had in abundance. People brought furnishings to the space for socializing, ornamented pine trees growing between the tracks around the holidays and ultimately appropriated parts of the infrastructure.<sup>28</sup>

In the late 1990s a group of neighbourhood residents called *Friends of the Highline* formed in order to maintain this unconventional space, which ultimately led to its formal redevelopment as a readily accessible public space. An international competition was held, and by 2003 the winning entry led by *James Corner + Field Operations*, with *Diller Scofidio + Renfro* was announced, with the best intentions of designing a self-sustaining bucolic landscape inspired by that which it was replacing.<sup>29</sup> In 2005 the area was promptly rezoned for residential development, triggering a construction boom in the surrounding neighbourhood.<sup>30</sup> While *Friends of the Highline* started out as a few resident activists, by the time the entries were announced, new *Friends* such as multinational corporation AOL Time Warner joined in as well. A web site has been set up for people to understand its history and track the progress of its transformation since 2000 by the *Friends* — further increasing its visibility.<sup>31</sup>

Both praise and criticism have been dealt for the design approaches. While some schemes pushed a desire to maintain and promote the diverse ecosystems that had established themselves there, ultimately, the increased public accessibility to it means a stripping of most traces of informal use — laying down

a new ground field. Many are concerned about the implications of this. In an article published shortly after the design winners were announced, Philip Nobel noted the following sentiment, capturing the tenuous nature of its future:

No one who loves New York...wants to see the mighty High Line razed, but its saviours should be wary of smoothing it with good intentions. Too much design could make it just another new place to avoid — too sterile, too themed. Consider what will be lost when the High Line is made safe for *flânerie*, when the thing itself survives but lives on only between quotation marks: not its function, but something very close to its soul.<sup>32</sup>

Recently opened to the public, the project web site outlines a set of guidelines for its occupation. Many of the informal activities that may have occurred there in the past (and some that may not have) now require a permit or are simply not allowed, such as vending, performing or biking/rollerblading.<sup>33</sup> The vegetation and some of the furnishings may be conceived of as adaptable and shifting, but it maintains a relatively static identity — for the time being, at least. Where it may have been an active space of participatory cultivation, play and illicit activities, it now positions itself as a space of leisure and contemplation.

\* \* \* \* \*



fig 6.21 NY Highline — A rendered section through the redeveloped deck

fig 6.22 NY Highline — The new planted deck being installed

fig 6.23 NY Highline — adaptable furniture that rolls along the old rail tracks

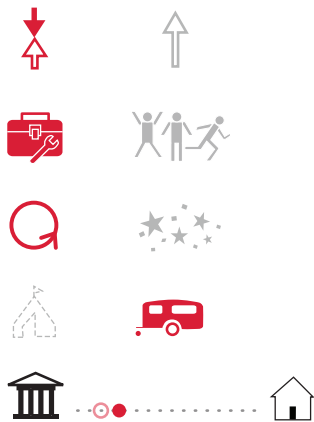
## BLIND FIELD      SPATIAL      OPERATIONAL

INITIATORS: Bellevue Housing Tower residents

PARTICIPANTS: Bellevue Housing Tower residents, Architect, Contractor, Building Manager, Building Superintendant

In the city of Toronto, while the economic and physical landscapes differ from those in New York, Berlin and Tokyo, there are more orphaned, disused and in-between spaces than meet the eye — many of which become available, either temporarily or permanently, when people simply refocuses their gaze.

The Bellevue community garden began when a number of tenants requested space to grow food.<sup>34</sup> A 326-unit high-rise apartment in the west end of the city, the tower and its nearby pool were built in 1971 and are now owned and operated by Toronto Community Housing (TCH).<sup>35</sup> Like many other housing developments built around this time in Toronto, the Bellevue tower's social infrastructures were designed in an era when demographics were quite different then they are today.<sup>36</sup> In its current state, the Bellevue tower bears witness to not only an increase in retirement-aged residents, but also a fairly accurate cross section of the diverse cultural groups that have immigrated to Canada in the last 15 to 20 years.<sup>37</sup>



Prior to the spring of 2007, TCH decided to permanently decommission its pool for three primary reasons: the first was the expensive cost of maintaining

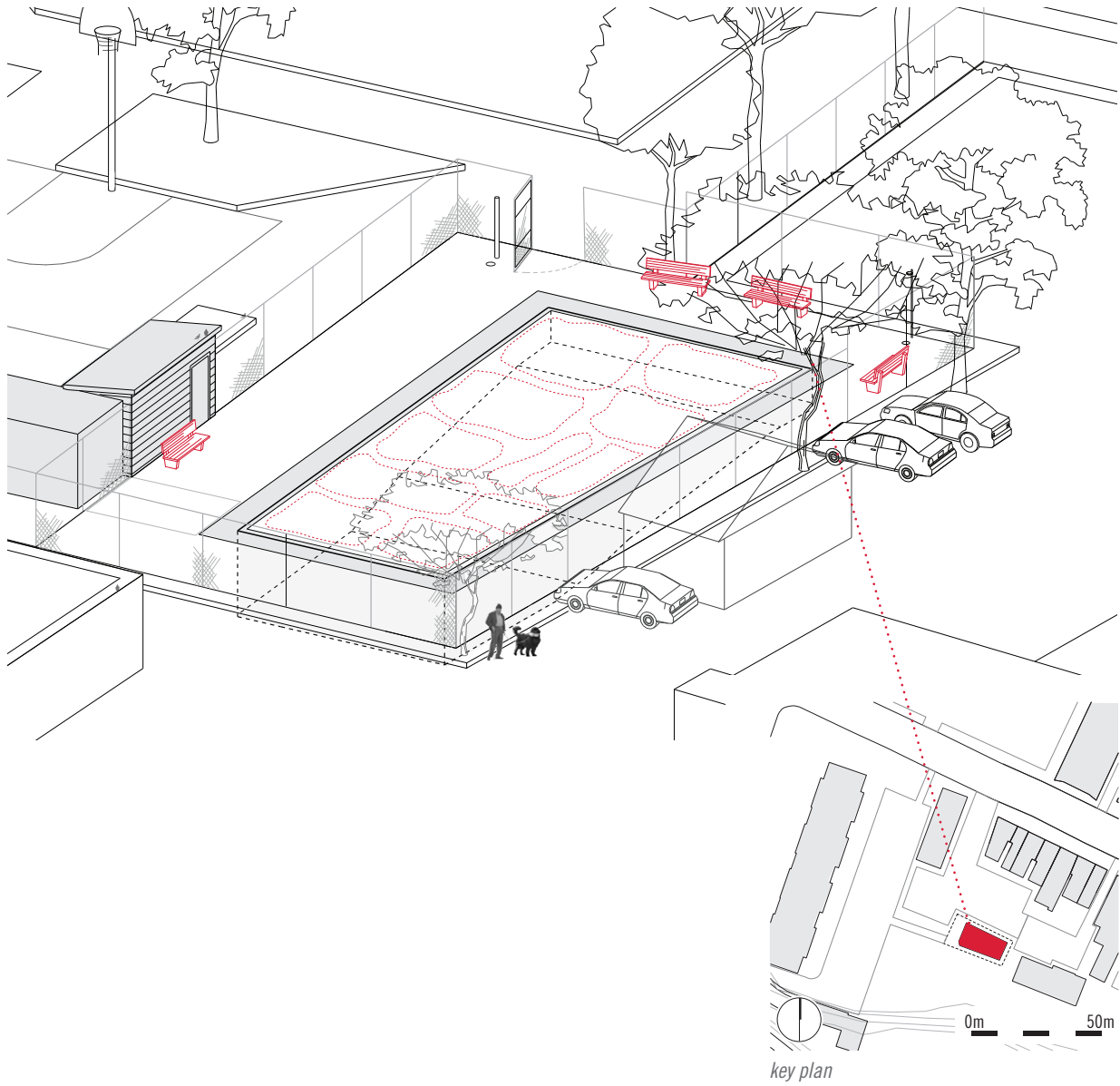
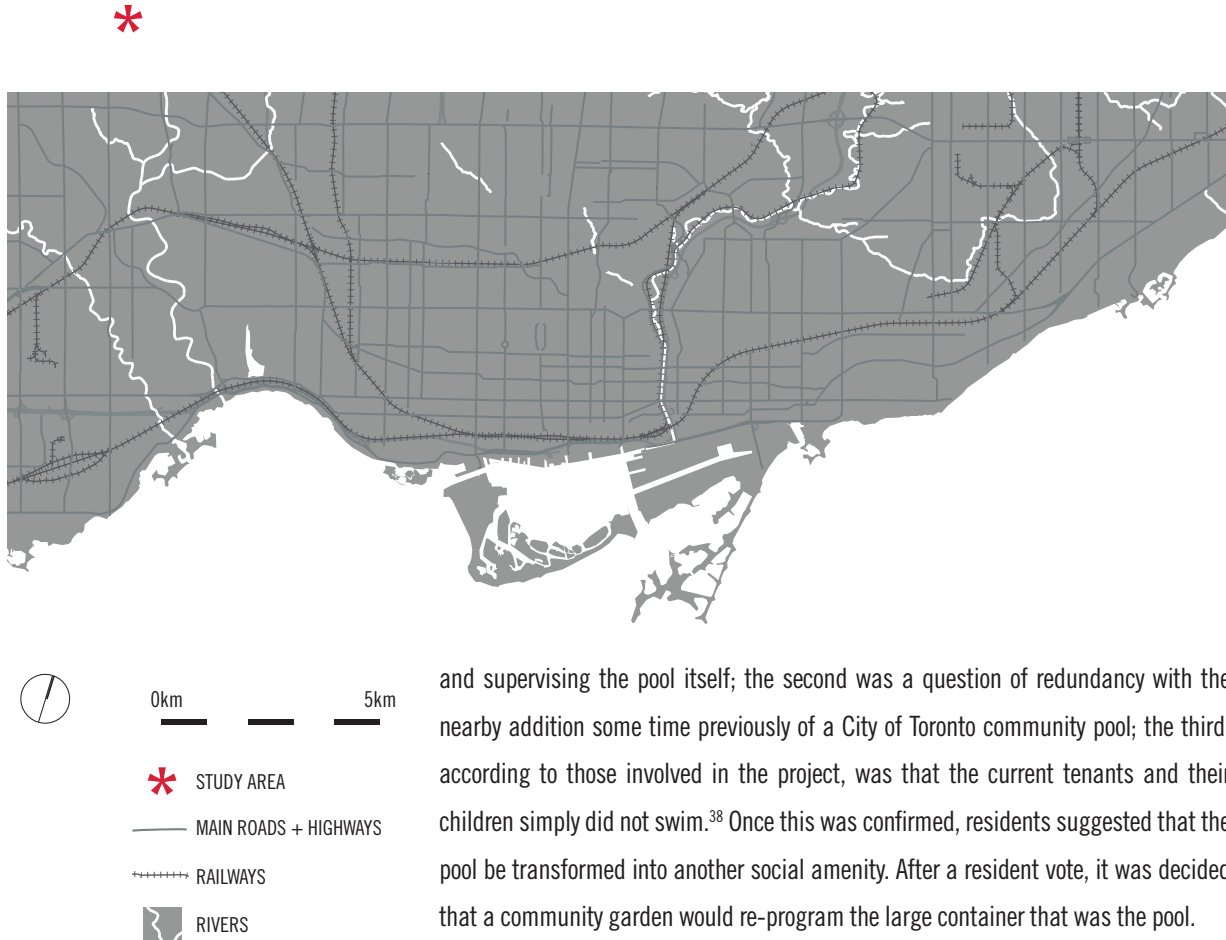


fig 6.24 Axonometric documentation —  
the container and its surrounding (sub)urban  
landscape





and supervising the pool itself; the second was a question of redundancy with the nearby addition some time previously of a City of Toronto community pool; the third, according to those involved in the project, was that the current tenants and their children simply did not swim.<sup>38</sup> Once this was confirmed, residents suggested that the pool be transformed into another social amenity. After a resident vote, it was decided that a community garden would re-program the large container that was the pool.

Once approved, with the assistance of a local architect and contractor, the work was undertaken in early spring. The professionals and residents donated time, energy and available resources to puncture the pool's bottom to allow for drainage. Soil was also donated by the assisting professionals, compacting enough to ensure limited settling.

fig 6.25 Partial map of the City of Toronto situating the garden

*The reclaimed pool is outside the bounds of the author's suspected study area, and well outside the bounds of many downtown residents' experience of the city. It is not quickly or easily accessible from downtown outside of weekday commuter hours*



The gardeners met, and based on their numbers, subdivided the pool into 17 plots (for 23 gardeners) each about the size “of two bathtubs.”<sup>39</sup> They provided the labour, and each selected the plants they wanted to grow. The plants varied according to the gardeners, many of whom were originally from Jamaica. They grew Callaloo, okra, ‘red peas’ (kidney beans), cucumber, tomatoes and corn, among other plants.

At the end of the first season, the garden began to show some signs of poor drainage. During the second season, the drainage issue increased, and the number of gardeners decreased. Although, overall, the gardeners questioned seemed quite happy with the produce they grew. One gardener noted an abundance of food which he was able to share with some of the older residents in the building. He tended to his garden frequently (his grandson even helped when he was visiting), and invested money in plants and soil.

As the 2009 season began, the ground became rather swampy due to improper drainage. Some were quite upset with this frustrating situation, and gave up on the project.<sup>40</sup> While gardening is a leisurely activity for some, for others it helps with the fresh food bills over the summer months, and creates a viable informal source of fresh, culturally appropriate food. Given their lack of ownership over the space, the gardeners are limited in the degree to which they feel they can intervene in it. It poses a risk that not all are willing to take. For one gardener, the prospect of being unable to garden, although frustrating due to the initial personal investment, meant that she would find other spaces around the neighbourhood to cultivate.<sup>41</sup>

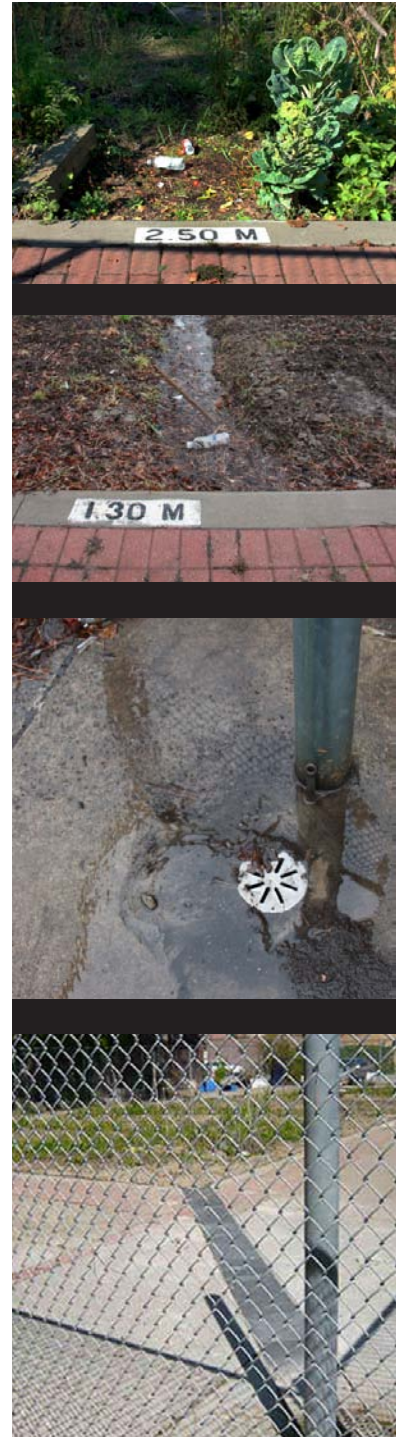


fig 6.26 The garden at the end of the 2008 season — lush and overgrown

fig 6.27 The poor drainage rendered the container unplatable in early spring 2009

fig 6.28 Rain puddling and draining poorly

fig 6.29 Repairs — a weeping tile was installed around the perimeter and joined to the existing drainage system by early summer 2009

[06-05-2008]

While doing research in the west end of Toronto, I came across what appeared to be a fenced-in rectangle of dirt. A second visit later in the season confirmed that it was in fact an outdoor swimming pool converted into a garden. After this discovery, I became determined to find out more about its history and participants.

[20-03-2009]

In a final attempt to contact the gardeners — as every formal body has been giving me the run around — I decided to tape a set of posters to the telephone poles outside the front entrance to the tower. Not unlike the poster that first led me to the garden, I wrapped it around the pole with clear packing tape, hoping it would last long enough for someone to spot it.

Luckily, Doreen recognized the photograph I included as her section of the garden — the very edge near the laneway fence — where she planted last year's crop of Callaloo and the remaining stems and leaves from some of her hot pepper plants. She sent me a quick email and agreed to talk.

[27-03-2009]

I got her call at 9am on a Tuesday morning. She explained how nice it was to have a safe place nearby to do some gardening. A single mother, Doreen liked the fact that she could keep an eye on her two young boys while growing some food. The boys were too young the year before, but now they help water the plants.

Doreen suggested I come to the meeting on Friday and maybe meet some other gardeners and the contractor and architect who did the work.

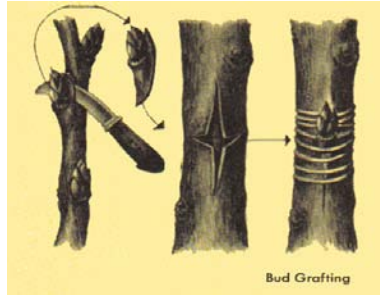


fig 6.30 Cultivate — collection 2



[03-04-2009]

Grant's grandfather was a farmer back in Jamaica and taught Grant all he knows about growing food. He taught him about different varieties, and how to graft them onto heartier plants in order to ensure stronger, more resilient crops.



*"After all, I never did use the pool to swim."* Grant confessed as we stood by the edge of the garden. While there wasn't much there but some empty plastic bottles floating in puddles — *"the ones the kids in the basketball throw over the wall"* — he pointed out where last year he had tended to his patch of the garden.

*"I spend time out here with my grandson,"* he tells me, *"we grow cucumber, red peas and tomatoes. Last year we grew some cabbage and okra too."*



[07-04-2009]

The architect explains to me that the project is a work in progress. *"It did great last year, and the year before that. With all the rain, though, it's just not draining properly....It's a sensitive subject with the residents, but we'll get it fixed, they'll see."*



[03-04-2009]

Once the professionals have gone, Doreen confesses her frustrations about the delay, describing the variety of things she grew last year that she couldn't find at the grocery store. *callaloo, Jamaican hot peppers....* The garden helps her provide for her family during the summer months — getting to know her neighbours and growing healthy food. *"It's 'social sustenance'"* she says, *"that's what they call it at the 'Food Share' meetings I am attending. They tell me that I don't have to put up with this; that I can find other places to garden."*

*"...when it isn't my property there's only so much I can do."*



*fig 6.31* Container 1 — spring 2009





*fig 6.32* Container 2 — late summer 2008

Recently, additional repairs were made to better adapt the pool to its new function. The building manager and TCH found funds, and the architect and contractor donated some additional time and labour. Recalibrating the primary infrastructures and loosening the hard boundary of this container — by fixing the drain — meant that the residents could once again begin renegotiating and reconfiguring the space. This has led to the return of a number of last year's gardeners, and an affirmation for many involved that the re-programming of the pool was indeed positive.

This personal and collective engagement with and upkeep of the garden creates an informal stage for differences to surface and appear to others, engendering dialogue between the residents. It is a work in progress, and in a constant state of becoming. The initial reprogramming of the space, as well as the way the collective 'design' of the garden is undertaken each year, only enriches this dialogue and the negotiations that are required for the better maintenance of the whole. While not as visible as a traditional square, these elements do provide a space of *action* and therefore a meaningful space of hidden appearance.

Varying in ideological standpoint and degree of trespass, the cases discussed all contribute to a re-examination of resources and their valuation along a process of urban (re)production. Each are attuned to reconsidering otherwise underused infrastructures as potentially viable spaces for informal cultivation. By re-conceiving the pool as an infrastructure — a material container, rather than simply a place to swim — possibilities arise for its reprogramming. It is re-valued

from an unsustainable public amenity, to one which is explicitly maintained by its participants' actions, becoming an ongoing register thereof. The same is true for *Guerrilla Gardening* efforts across the city — in their spatial use and material acquisition. In light of the rather wasteful traditional path of production, consumption and waste, such cases provide a refreshing *détournement*, adding informal economic, cultural and social value to the constructed and reconstructed urban landscape.

\* \* \* \* \*





*fig 6.33 Temporarily reappropriated Finch Avenue hydro corridors, Toronto*



*fig 6.34 Campbell-Rankin community garden located on City of Toronto Transportation land in Toronto's west end*

## Endnotes

- 1 Richard Sennett, *Uses of Disorder : Personal Identity and City Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1970), 85.
- 2 Richard Reynolds, *On Guerrilla Gardening : A Handbook for Gardening without Boundaries*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Bloomsbury : Distributed to the trade by Macmillan, 2008), 22-23.
- 3 Quoted from an interview with author during a seed bomb making event in April 2009.
- 4 "Mount Denis Secret Garden and Riverbank Tour" <[http://www.janeswalk.net/participating\\_cities/toronto](http://www.janeswalk.net/participating_cities/toronto)>
- 5 Charles Keith Maisels, *Emergence of Civilisation : From Hunting and Gathering to Agriculture, Cities, and the State in the Near East* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1989), 40.
- 6 Merriam-Webster's dictionary < <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivate>> (accessed June 12 2009)
- 7 Reynolds, *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening without Boundaries*, 16.
- 8 Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma : A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 141
- 9 Geoff Kennedy, *Diggers, Levellers, and Agrarian Capitalism : Radical Political Thought in Seventeenth Century England* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2008), 11
- 10 Ibid, 11.
- 11 Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma : A Natural History of Four Meals*, 141.
- 12 Chris Carlsson, *Nowtopia : How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant-Lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today* (Oakland, CA ; Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2008), 85.
- 13 Don Mitchell, *Right to the City : Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York ; London: Guilford Press, 2003), viii, 152.
- 14 Ibid, 152.
- 15 Tom Fox, Ian Koeppel and Susan Kellam, *Struggle for Space: The Greening of New York City, 1970-1984* (New York, N.Y: Neighbourhood Open Space Coalition, 1985), 7.
- 16 Ibid, 7.
- 17 <[http://www.lizchristygarden.org/lcbh\\_files/seed\\_bomb.html](http://www.lizchristygarden.org/lcbh_files/seed_bomb.html)>
- 18 Reynolds, *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening without Boundaries*, 100-111.
- 19 Fox, Koeppel and Kellam, *Struggle for Space: The Greening of New York City, 1970-1984*, 7.
- 20 Ibid, 67.
- 21 A recent publication by a London Guerrilla Gardener has also gained in popularity, tracing the history of the practice and instructing those who wish to undertake similar actions. Richard Reynolds, *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening without Boundaries*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury and Macmillan, 2008).
- 22 <<http://www.publicspace.ca/aboutus.htm>>

- 23 Toronto Public Space committee, Guerrilla Gardening group homepage <<http://www.publicspace.ca/gardeners.htm>>
- 24 Quoted from an interview with Andy, the 2008 Toronto Guerrilla Gardening coordinator (May 03 2009)
- 25 <<http://www.thehighline.org/about/high-line-history>>
- 26 Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen, *Spaces of Uncertainty* (Wuppertal, Germany: Verlag Muller & Busman KG, 2002), 151.
- 27 Gil Doron, "Lost Zones" in *Blueprint*, no. 172, May 2000, 68.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Philip Nobel, "Let It Be" in *Metropolis*, v.24, no.2 (May 2002), 82.
- 30 Alex Ulman, "New York's Highline Spurring Innovative building and planning," *Architectural Record*, v.194, no.6 (June 2006) 54
- 31 Philip Nobel, "The High Life on the High Line" in *Metropolis*, v.21, no.9 (May 2002), 68.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 <<http://www.thehighline.org/about/park-information>>
- 34 Based on field research conducted with the architect involved in the project (April 03 2009)
- 35 Toronto Community Housing <[http://www.torontohousing.ca/our\\_housing/weston\\_rexdale](http://www.torontohousing.ca/our_housing/weston_rexdale)>
- 36 John Bentley Mays, *Emerald City: Toronto Visited* (Toronto: Viking, 1994), 75.
- 37 Lorinc sites similar but higher density examples in the East end as well of such towers or groupings of towers now currently occupied as a first home for numerous new immigrants in the last 15+ years. John Lorinc, *New City: How the Crisis in Canada's Urban Centres is Reshaping the Nation* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2006), 73-74.
- 38 Based on field research conducted with the architect involved in the project (April 03 2009).
- 39 Jennifer Bain, "Good Food for all : visiting community projects reveals how important fresh food is to everybody" in The Toronto Star, Oct 03 2007, <<http://www.thestar.com/living/article/262762>> (accessed 13 September 2008).
- 40 One of the more vocal gardeners noted that in 2009, there was less participation than in years past, attributing it to the degradation of the quality of growing space, as well as the high turnover of residents in the apartment building.
- 41 Discussed in a phone interview, and again in person with one of the more vocal gardeners (April 02 2009).

# [re]actions

The user's space is lived — not represented. When compared with the abstract space of experts (architects, urbanists, and planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one, which is to say subjective...

Appropriated places would be *fixed, semi-fixed, movable* or *vacant*...

a not unimportant part is played by the contradiction between the *ephemeral* and the *stable*...between *dwelling* and *wandering*.

HENRI LEFEBVRE  
*The Production of Space*, (1974) 362

## 7.0 CRITICAL SPATIAL PRACTICE

*The architect's only option is to find a course for revolutionary praxis outside the traditional boundaries of his field -*

If architectural theorist Joan Ockman is correct in her assertion quoted above, then I suggest...to develop as a critical practice architecture must look to art, and move outside the traditional boundaries of its field and into a place between disciplines...<sup>1</sup>

JANE RENDELL

The work will be an act of resistance to occupy and reclaim a space and change its meaning. At the same time, the work mirrors the socio-economic aspect of the city — the city as a resource, the materiality of the city, the free material of a city.<sup>2</sup>

KOBBERLING & KALTWASSER

Temporary spaces are spaces opened up by temporary projects, whether they are produced by economic or aesthetic, urban planning, cultural reasons or simply by a desire to use something....They are not empty; they are screens onto which something is projected, but they already contained information beforehand. They can be thought of as photosensitive material on which all attempts at projection have left traces over time: immaterial palimpsests, so to speak, that nonetheless have a location. The intensity and durability of these traces varies.<sup>3</sup>

ROBERT TEMEL [Urban Catalyst]





*fig 7.1 still entitled 'Life' from  
Superstudio's film series 'Five Fundamental  
Acts'*

## EXPANDING THE BLIND FIELD THROUGH DESIGN

In light of the observations, encounters and dialogues discussed in Part 2 of this thesis, this chapter bridges the gap between certain recurring concepts that have surfaced over the course of the research and design praxis. Here I take a critical look at a series of projects which straddle the spaces between architecture and other creative fields. In doing so, it is useful to borrow art and architecture critic and historian Jane Rendell's term *critical spatial practice*.<sup>4</sup> The term aligns itself well with this thesis insofar as it asserts the importance of observation and 'site-writing' as a form of critical spatial practice in its own right. However, this thesis expands the term further into issues of design and more formal-constructed engagements with the urban field. *Critical spatial practice*, ultimately, is the means by which professional designers, artists and activists engage with a particular urban landscape to critique and often transgress these. This critique varies in degrees of subtlety.

The projects that follow are selected for their particular expansion of a blind field of architectural space, matter, time or practice. Given each project's location in either a formal or informal public space, each of the projects discussed below in some way derives from or contributes to Hannah Arendt's concept of *action*. Each project is a combination of spatial, material and operational fields expanded. Key issues in each are foregrounded to reconsider design's role as it intersects with the theories and/or practices discussed in the previous three chapters. Issues in the comparative graphic index presented at the end of Chapter

3: [in]formal and introducing each of the cases in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 serve as equally valuable points of intersection and comparison with the more informal counterparts discussed thus far.

### **ACTION — A SPACE OF APPEARANCE AND DIALOGUE**

As George Baird alludes to in the quote introducing the first part of this thesis (page 5), a hopeful return to certain base concepts of Arendt's can provide a starting point for the potentials of such a realm. Moving away from concepts of *permanence* and *institutionalization*, a recasting and expansion of *action* and *difference* proves useful in attempting to reframe and engage in a design praxis which expands public blind fields.<sup>5</sup>

*Action*, the fundamental and most esteemed activity of *vita activa* for Arendt, is the “only activity that goes on directly between men without intermediary of things or matter, [it] corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world...[and is] *the* condition of political life.”<sup>6</sup> As discussed previously, Arendt's ultimate hope for a public space is that it will be permanent; however, a further reading reveals her stance that “...action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.”<sup>7</sup> Contemporizing such claims, Calhoun points out:

If we are speaking about a mode of establishing relationships between human beings, then publicness can be instantiated in a variety of social spaces by no



fig 7.2 Preparing for a 'capture the flag' event at King and Bay Street, Toronto's business district during desolate evening hours, October 14 2008

fig 7.3 A subway car 'silent dance party' in a subway car in Toronto, February 23 2008

fig 7.4 A pillowfight by Newmindspace in Toronto's Dundas Square, March 21 2009

means all of which are institutionalized as political by their relationship to the state. Publicness can be created wherever people are related by their undetermined speech and action...such institutionalization is not a precondition of publicness.<sup>8</sup>

From here, one can speculate on the multiplicity of spaces and conditions for such public *praxes* to occur. Through such praxis, man can constantly redraw the bounds of public space, and enact his own freedom in space, time and material. Striving for such an architectural praxis — one that might reframe strategic and operational models of designing and engaging meaningfully with urban form — one must utilize tactical actions.

### ACTION [RE]CONSTRUCTED — USER RECLAMATION

A first type of practice is a reinterpretation of action by playful-subversive means, reminiscent of *Dadaist's happenings* and the *Situationist's détournement*.<sup>9</sup> One of the increasingly popular examples of this is what has been termed the *urban playground movement*. Overtaking what are most often overtly public spaces, groups such as *Improv everywhere*, *Improv Toronto* and *Newmindspace* plan events where participants — who are contacted prior to the event via email — swarm a particular space at a particular time and take part in a participatory event.<sup>10</sup> This form of 'appropriation' relies minimally on architecture — with some minor portable tools or props — and mostly on the spectacle arising from a break from the everyday; seemingly, it quite often serves

as a direct critique of consumer culture. A sort of ‘make-believe chaos,’ this type of constructed play seems to be a disturbance for many, and seems to focus more on the hyper-event than the actual appropriation of space. Examples of these include collective games of capture the flag, subway dance parties and pillow fights in public spaces such as Yonge-Dundas Square, and in New York a staged high five along an ascending escalator between subway platforms.<sup>11</sup>

While these flash-mob, event-based ‘actions’ possess tactical qualities, their operation relies on anything but blindness. They do provide a rupture from the everyday, but many of these actions rely largely on their ability to create a very public and noticeable disruption, and their personally or collectively meaningful dialogue with the city can be debated. Also, of late, they have become an increasingly popular means of viral advertising — seemingly defeating the counter-consumer culture ethos of the original events.<sup>12</sup>

### EXPANDING SPATIAL FIELDS — THRESHOLD & GAP REVISITED

Public art and design practices are expanding the spatial blind fields discussed in the previous chapters. Returning in particular to the relevance of the threshold and the gap, these critical spatial practices seem to favour a heightening of these spaces’ social capacity as spaces ‘in-between,’ in Martin Buber’s sense of the word — where public space exists first and foremost in the space in between men, rather than in a physical representation of democratic form.<sup>13</sup>

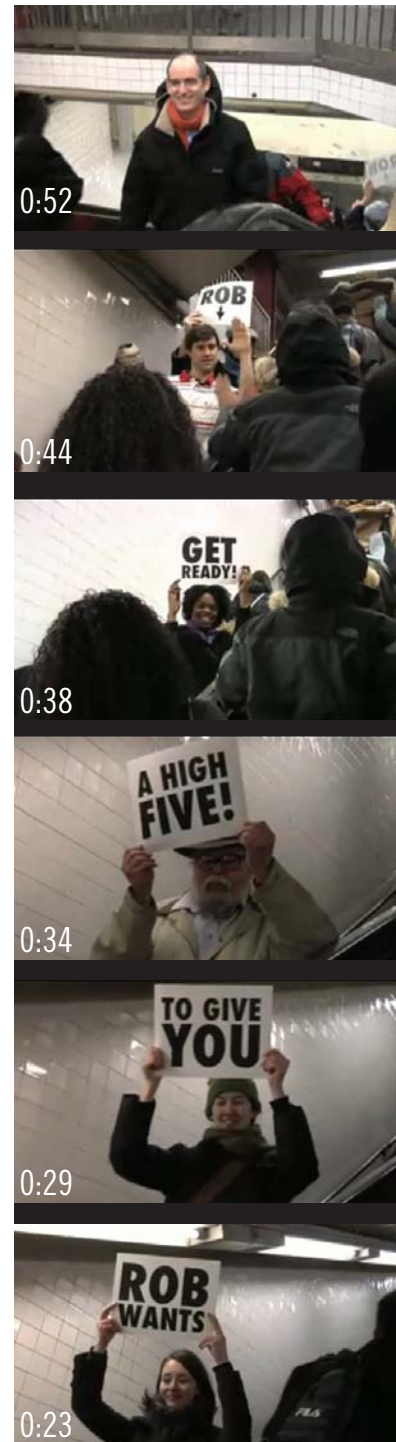


fig 7.5 The ‘high-five escalator’ project staged during a busy morning commute in one of the New York City subway system’s longer ascending escalator rides between levels



Exploring the potency of this space in between and its expansion is Yung Ho Chang/Atelier FCJZ's project 'Sliding/Folding/Swing' door in Beijing. The project intervenes on an existing large, blank industrial door, subverting it by cleverly hiding a secondary human-scaled door within it. The project subtly plays on the material of the city and the threshold between inside and out. It expands the conventional door into something special at certain times when it is in use, and then returns back to its conventional state when it is not. Chang's work is a direct commentary on the misuse and spatial appropriation latent in much of China's urban fabric.<sup>14</sup>

In his works and writings, Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck follows a similar humanist vein. In addition to the playgrounds mentioned in Chapter 4, van Eyck's Sonsbeek pavilion — a temporary structure erected in the 1960s — can be explored as a development on a similar theme. An open form providing shelter for small outdoor sculptures, the pavilion consisted of a light roof supported by six parallel planes. Through various carefully orchestrated breaks and curvatures in these planes, the forms entice wandering and spontaneous discovery through movement — where the user becomes an active participant in making the space.<sup>15</sup> Although programmatically simple, it is an interesting piece of dialogical form, as it truly is architecture made through use and lived experience, anticipating a "reactive and potentially creative user."<sup>16</sup>

A project which attempts to equally expand the threshold, particularly in the case of the boundary, Tejo Remy's work 'Playground Fence' attempts to

fig 7.6 Yung Ho Chang's *Sliding/Folding/Swing Door* in Beijing



dissolve moments in the boundary between formal spaces of play, and those of potential play around its edges. Inserting moments of disjunction, inflection and deflection of the typical metal security fence creates spaces where adults and children alike can appropriate, inhabit and socialize in and upon an otherwise divisive construct.

Operating on a variety of 'fixed' architectural elements, these projects subvert conventional typologies in an act of providing generosity through design — expanding the threshold of in-between spaces.

### EXPANDING MATERIAL FIELDS — USER ADAPTABILITY

Certain projects attempt a subversion of the power structures inherent in traditionally designed objects by giving the user greater opportunity to manipulate a set of tools/materials themselves — invoking a sense of democracy which comes from the individual's ability to choose. A design strategy where adaptation of mobile pieces in a frame or adaptable elements contained in a bounded space is deployed in order to invoke a sense of democracy and personal participation in the process of making and remaking the urban environment.<sup>17</sup>

The theoretical work of artist Nils Norman speculates on spaces which would be set aside for the user to creatively adapt to his or her own choosing. 'Pockets of Disorder,' a theoretical proposition for a network of play spaces in

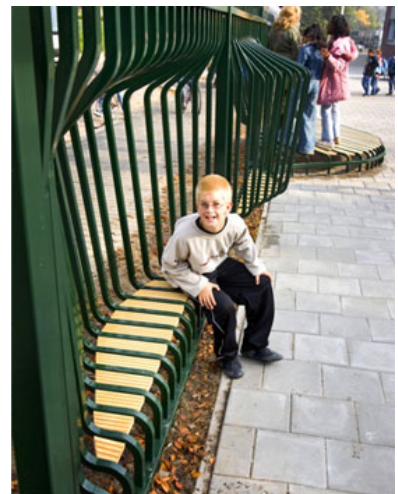
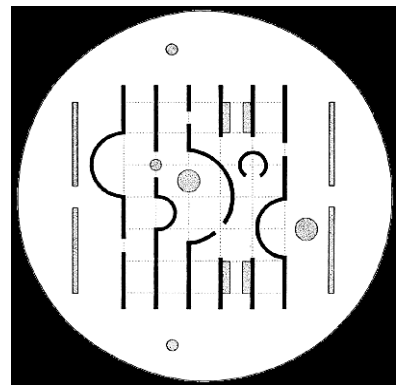


fig 7.7 View within looking out of the Sonsbeek Pavilion

fig 7.8 Plan of Aldo van Eyck's Sonsbeek Pavilion

fig 7.9 Tejo Remy's Playground Fence





London's East End, explores issues of adequate provision of public and social infrastructure in light of a recent increase of gentrification.<sup>18</sup> Norman's disruptive, urban counter-developmental playground models seem very much aligned with the SI's *détournement* and Hill's *creative user*. Inspired by 1940s Dutch 'adventure playgrounds,' the work contests the current state of controlled public space by making a space of disjuncture or 'counter-public space' as part of an urban 'oppositional development strategy.'<sup>19</sup> Each space is left 'unfinished,' ultimately providing a 'kit of random parts' for children to directly engage with. These spaces are meant to stimulate the mind and body through the practice of constructing and reconstructing, providing actors with the opportunity to participate in the creation of their own surroundings and, ultimately, challenge the fixity and rigidity of over-designed or controlled public spaces. The incompleteness serves as grounds for continued and evolving authorship of form — setting the stage for a (conceptual) dialogue between various 'authors.'<sup>20</sup> For this to occur, the project is clearly defined and *contained* as an *other*, rather than occur in the interstices of existing urban form.

Beyond Norman's theoretical art practice, there are more subtle, richer and, in many ways, equally subversive design practices exploring these issues of user material adaptability and disjunction. Often 'making do' with site conditions and/or materials, these projects tactically re-appropriate urban blind fields for public use — challenging their often 'un-publicness' in operation or ownership.

fig 7.10 Nils Norman's theoretical art project 'Pockets of Dissorder' — a space to be made and remade

fig 7.11 Nils Norman's 'Pockets of Dissorder'

Another project which addresses the issue of user manipulation — for both material expansion and contraction — is Steven Holl's *Storefront for Art and Architecture*. Consisting primarily of a façade that lines the edge of a wedged residual lot in Manhattan, 'the Storefront's' singular exterior wall can be opened and shut allowing a blurring of the boundaries between the public street and the small private gallery. Ultimately, the gallery space cannot be manipulated by all users — it is a private institution — and does not take nearly as political a stance as, for example, Norman's work. However, rhetorically and physically the adaptation of the façade pieces transform the nature of the streetscape, and building interior as well as challenge one's conception of door, window and wall.<sup>21</sup>

On a more intimate scale, Mexican design-build firm *Ludens* uses built objects and spaces to explore the latent potentials in — and means by which — design can serve as a critical dialogical form. Most often at the intimate scale of the body, Ivan Hernandez Quintela, the principal of the firm, explores concepts of negotiation, stability, user control and engagement. Revealing the catalytic and self-critical role urban design can play, Hernandez sees his works "as latent potential — intimate prosthetics waiting for users to appropriate and implement them into their everyday life."<sup>22</sup> *Urban Prosthetic* seems an apt description, given their careful insertion into existing city spaces and situations. Their aims are often to challenge the current political, public or social status quo as well as question the relationship between form and relatedness. Physical destabilization

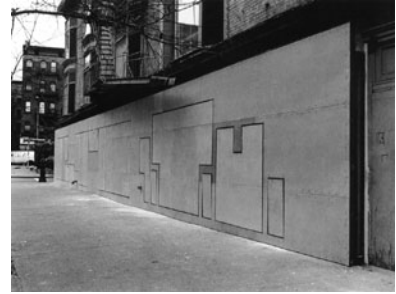


fig 7.12 Steven Holl's 'Storefront for Architecture' which transforms a wall into doors, windows and tables

fig 7.13 Ludens' 'public support' and 'unstable obstacle'  
The former provides public amenity through minimal 'prosthetic' insertions. The latter relies upon user participation to maintain stability and can be adapted at the user's will



as a means towards critical self discovery is a recurring theme throughout his work. As Hernandez points out, “at times I intentionally leave some of the tools incomplete or inconclusive to provoke users to adapt, adjust, and perhaps misuse them.”<sup>23</sup>

While these projects allow for increased adaptability, to a certain degree much of the work is done for the user. Adaptation within a limited set of parts rather than participant introduction of their own parts risks creating a designer-enabled game rather than a meaningful accumulation of individual participants’ contributions.



## EXPANDING TEMPORAL FIELDS — CREATIVE TEMPORARY USE

Another means by which such critical practice takes place is through tactical temporary design practices or spatial transformations by activist groups like *Streets are for People* and *Rebar*. Also relying on events, they encourage participation with many of the same tactics as those of the *urban playground movement*, but with a generally more participatory type of staged event. Finding ways to tactically occupy time and space, events such as *Rebar’s park(ing)* make use of the formal system of the parking meter and its ‘purchase’ of the confines of the parking spot to create temporary playgrounds, parks and dining areas. Users are encouraged through viral dissemination of their ‘parking manual’ to

fig 7.14 A parking spot temporarily grassed over. Props such as a bench and a potted tree are also introduced into the space

fig 7.15 Temporary hoarding for REBAR’s Park[ing] project

undertake these themselves, or to simply participate in enjoying the ‘newly rented public space’ of another.<sup>24</sup> The curbside parking spot can belong temporarily to either the pedestrian or the car by the ‘purchase’/rental thereof – through the intermediary of a parking meter.

*Streets are for People*’s recent ‘construction site picnics’ operate on a similar premise, tactically appropriating spaces bounded off for relatively minor street construction during off-hours (mostly Sunday afternoons) in order to picnic, play music and collectively appropriate this newly found temporary public space.<sup>25</sup> Encouraging the incorporation of mobile props in these spaces, they challenge the primacy of the automobile and attempt to reclaim parts of the street areas at the threshold between the space of the automobile and the pedestrian.

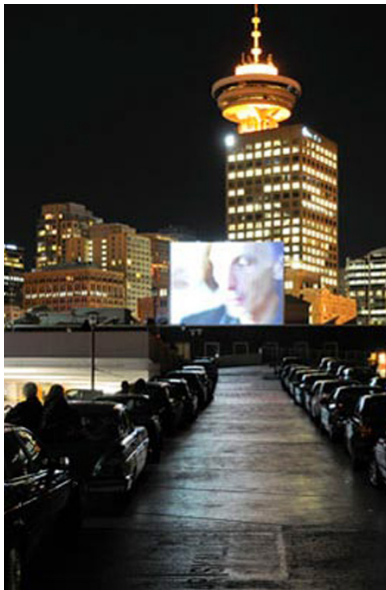
For most formal architectures, it is a challenge — but is not impossible — to find ways of appropriating time gaps in the city. Vancouver’s *Urban Republic Arts Society* (or Urban Republic) is a non-profit group of architects, artists and writers that operate their own critical spatial practices. They note that, using “the tools of art and design to cultivate a sense of place and opportunities for social engagement [they] operate at the intersection of art, architecture and urbanism.”<sup>26</sup> In particular, their recent project entitled ‘Gastown Drive-in’ takes advantage of one of Vancouver’s many parking garage structures in the Downtown Vancouver neighbourhood of Gastown.<sup>27</sup> Urban Republic worked with a cross-section of local groups and organizations to transform the rooftop of the parking garage into a local film-screening site for three evenings in September 2008. The artists designed a screen on which to project the films and reconceived of the



fig 7.16 ‘Streets are for People’ street (construction) picnic — 2008 (Bathurst Avenue Toronto)

fig 7.17 ‘Streets are for People’ street (construction) picnic — 2008 (Bathurst Avenue Toronto)

fig 7.18 ‘Streets are for People’ street (parking lot) picnic & game play — 2006



*fig 7.19 Urban Republic's temporary 'Gastown drive-in' — the movie screen installed temporarily on a privately owned building. The Vancouver skyline beyond*

*fig 7.20 Urban Republic's temporary 'Gastown drive-in' — front row pedestrian seating*

latent potential of the functional parking garage infrastructure as a social and cultural one during its 'off hours.'<sup>28</sup> The screen was mounted on a privately owned property, while the viewers assembled for free (\$6 for automobiles) atop a city owned parking garage — negotiations of use of both these structures were greatly facilitated by the professional architects.<sup>29</sup> As Peeroj Thakre, one of the architects involved, explains, it is not always easy to undertake such projects but,

"if [they] weren't architects (who carry liability insurance) [they] would unlikely be able to accomplish what [they] do. A building permit application is required similar to [the construction of] a building.... we submit a letter regarding occupant loads and exiting [and] carry a Special Events insurance policy too..."<sup>30</sup>

Thus, another tangential but important architectural contribution expands the value of their existing professional skills and toolset to navigate through boundaries that informal bodies may not have access to.

For all these practices, the subversion of space for a limited duration of time assists in the heightening of importance of the event. The creative reclamations, bare resemblance to those undertaken by the vendors in Chinatown, for example, find temporal gaps in existing formal systems — particularly those that privilege vehicular public space — and subvert them into critical and cultural forums. Where Urban Republic's work is interesting is in the dialogue between these two very different users and the generosity in taking a chance despite liability issues that inevitably come with using private property for such a public program.



## EXPANDING PARTICIPATION & PRAXIS — SPACE, MATERIAL, TIME & PARTICIPATION EXPANDED

There are other equally tactical but more sophisticated means by which certain designers are expanding the field of praxis along similar lines of action. Acknowledging the potentials inherent in not only urban space and materials, certain architects are beginning to engage laterally across traditional power structures and asserting an alternate agency.

A first means of expanding praxis is through a reconsideration of urban space and material generosity. For artists and urban activists like Folke Köbberling and Martin Kaltwasser, the marginal spaces of Berlin serve as both spatial inspiration and mining ground. Many of their temporary use projects inhabit the line between art and architecture, establishing a practice that explores the social, political and sustainable potentials of their surrounding landscape. As redevelopment becomes increasingly feasible in certain parts of Berlin, they claim to witness the city's traditional public realm changing, developing towards a more "neoliberal city of representation."<sup>31</sup> Their project for the 2009 Radiator Festival, entitled 'Urban Blind Spot,' critically questions the lack of open and indeterminate space that comes along with such a shift. The project carefully mapped the location of CCTV camera coverage across the city of Nottingham and constructed small containers of 'indeterminacy' for the individual to fall in a 'blind spot' of the gaze of these all pervasive new technologies. The group describes the projects as an "act of resistance to occupy and reclaim a space and change its meaning. At



*fig 7.21 Köbberling & Kaltwasser's mining for urban detritus to subvert and revalue into a variety of artistic and small architectural projects*

*fig 7.22 Köbberling & Kaltwasser's 'Urban Blind Spot' — a critical urban art piece which maps and builds CCTV camera 'blind spots'*



fig 7.23 *Recetas Urbanas* — seizing opportunity latent in a banal urban structure: the dumpster

fig 7.24 *Recetas Urbanas* — tactical playgrounds made out of garbage dumpsters

the same time, the work mirrors the socio-economic aspect of the city — the city as a resource, the materiality of the city, the free material of a city.”<sup>32</sup>

In an equally resourceful sense, Spanish architecture firm *Recetas Urbanas* (or Urban Prescriptions), in their ‘taking the street’ project, devise a way of ‘sidetracking’ Seville’s building authorities in applying for a dumpster and minor works application to create a temporary public space. Once this is done, the dumpster is brought to a site of their choosing for a small fee and can be manipulated at will. With a few adapted recycled tools and attachments, they provide the instructions to create a public play space where one would have taken much more time to develop with the City by longer bureaucratic means.<sup>33</sup>

Both these projects raise awareness, through mappings and design of the existing power structures latent in their own urban situations, which impede informal appropriation and, more broadly, a meaningful public life. The designer therefore has the potential to act as an empowering agent, even by simply making these legible, as well as finding means to manipulate them.

Returning to a more fundamental point of critical spatial practice, is in the ‘how’ and ‘whom’ which begins the project. As Jane Rendell clarifies, the architectural brief and the client, developer or other source of funding ultimately drives the current conventional architectural project. An expanded Critical Spatial Practice would first discover either problem in the original brief’s oversights, gaining traction in this.<sup>34</sup> Along with this critique is the idea that both the



designers and the users participate more directly in the design and construction of the architecture. A deeper dialogue surrounding production and use can ultimately arise.

A collaboration between architect Adrian Blackwell, graduate architecture students at the University of Toronto, Action for Neighbourhood Change and the Mount Dennis Community Kitchen group — made up of residents in an aging inner suburban priority neighbourhood in Toronto — resulted in the spring 2008 design and build of a mobile community kitchen. Expanding traditional academic, institutional and resident boundaries, the project statement describes the intentions of the collaboration as follows:

While it is unusual for a burgeoning community group to receive weekly architectural presentations, it is equally unusual for architectural students to have to interact with a real client in the form of a working community organization — and then deliver the project at full scale. This new dynamic has produced architecture of mobility and variability based in the social realities of Toronto. The final design includes three mobile carts calibrated to the activities and site conditions of Mount Dennis and fabricated with emphasis on the durability of recovered materials.<sup>35</sup>

The Mount Dennis community kitchen is an interesting example of expansion of spatial, operational and participatory blind fields. Spatially, the objects can accommodate multiple terrains and to some degree, the needs of multiple publics. Materially, it reclaims and revalues urban detritus (such as bicycles), repurposing them through their own ingenuity (disassembling the



fig 7.25 'Adrian Blackwell and University of Toronto graduate students: 'Mount Dennis Mobile Kitchen' - students and community members contributing time and labour

fig 7.26 'Mount Dennis Mobile Kitchen' — mining the urban landscape for adaptable materials to form the mobile containment unit

fig 7.27 'Mount Dennis Mobile Kitchen' — celebrating the kitchen's completion at the mobile cooking unit



fig 7.28 *Atelier d'Architecture Autogere (AAA) and their project 'Eco-box' — view from the street, outside the bounded garden*

fig 7.29 *AAA's 'Eco-box' — the adaptable garden skids and mobile kitchen module*

fig 7.30 *AAA's 'Eco-box' — tending to the garden plots*

wheels for reuse in the mobility) and revaluing them through the sweat equity of those involved (the students and a nearby metal supplier).

As well, much like the drive-in at the parking garage mentioned earlier, the cart's mobility renders it tactical insofar as it can appropriate other infrastructures' underutilized times (for example, one of the members currently involved in the operation of the mobile kitchen noted that it is used in a school parking lot on weekends). Finally, as noted by the architects in the quote above, traditional design hierarchies are challenged and participation in the conception, design and fabrication are undertaken by multiple conflicting groups of urban actors, rendering a richer product more sensitively positioned in relation to myriad uses.

Since 2001, the artist, architecture student and architect collective of *Atelier d'Architecture Autogéré* has participated in a series of projects in La Chapelle, a northern suburban neighbourhood of Paris. Most notably, the project *Ecobox* aimed to expand architectural praxis into a variety of blind fields for growing gardens and growing community. Doina Petrescu, one of the key instigators involved, describes the ongoing works as “a series of self-managed projects...which encourage residents to get access to and critically transform temporary misused or underused spaces. [They] valorize a flexible and reversible use of space and aim to preserve urban ‘biodiversity’ by encouraging the co-existence of a wide range of life-styles and living practices.”<sup>36</sup>

This project rethinks the architect's agency and expands architectural praxis in a number of ways. Spatially, it reclaims underused *Terrain Vagues* in the city that would be otherwise closed off and reappropriates them for a variety of social purposes, such as community forums and gardens. Materially, the collective underwent a thorough study of resources across the local urban landscape, in order to reclaim, repurpose and revalue them, such as shipping skids fundamental to the organization of the garden. Temporally, the project operates on the premise that it can be relocated if and when need be, to a variety of other spaces around the neighbourhood. The mobility of the skids and the ephemerality of the gardens play an important part in this. Much like the Toronto case, they also include a community kitchen component, which creates the potential for other temporary influxes of use.

Ultimately, the accumulation of skills, concerns and needs that each of the participants bring to the table assists in the space's construct as an ongoing dynamic public forum. In this, as in that of the Mount Denis community kitchen, the skills of the architect as observer, user/participant, coordinator, graphic communicator and ultimately tactician are deployed in many ways that subvert traditional hierarchical models of praxis. Crucial to this shift is a reconsideration of the relationship between all participants and seeing the potential in both conflict and barriers as opportunities for dialogue and critical spatial practice.

While this chapter presents a series of artistic and design practices that intersect with the expanded blind fields discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 (*Play*,

*Exchange* and *Cultivation*), it does not hasten to say that all cases expand urban blind fields in an equally meaningful way. Instead, each foregrounds key issues relevant to a reconception of space, material, time and participation as they relate to particular urban environments and matters of concern to their authors. However, each responds to issues present in the urban landscape in ways that challenge preconceived notions of public and use. They acknowledge the importance of actor participation as part of a richer public form and forum, and to some degree expand the value of the architect's latent potential as a professional.

In many ways, they offer a response to Buber's request for a space that accommodates the *in between*. Furthermore, they also respond to architectural theorist Ignasi de Sola Morales' request for a *weak* architecture. Rather than being domineering and monumental in scale or representation, they contribute to the creation of an edge upon which action and dialogue can find a home.<sup>37</sup> While many of the projects attempt to prompt or catalyze action, arguably the more successful projects do so subtly in a way that asks for the individual's reconsideration of the space on his or her own terms. The balance between this is not easy. However, this seems to be a more enabling and empowering position of weakness, and engenders a more genuine participation — thereby contributing more meaningfully to the urban public landscape.

\* \* \* \* \*



*fig 7.31 Urban Republic's temporary  
'Gastown drive-in' — best seat in the house*

## Endnotes

- 1 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture : A Place between* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 191.
- 2 Jeff Squires, "Building 'Blind Spots' for the New Urban Environment" in, PSFK.com, posted Feb 04 2009 <<http://www.psfk.com/2009/02/building-blind-spots-for-the-new-urban-environment.html>> (accessed May 28 2009)
- 3 Robert Temel, "The temporary in the City," in Florian Haydn and Robert Temel, *Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the use of City Spaces* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2006), 59-60.
- 4 Rendell, *Art and Architecture : A Place between*, 191.
- 5 A similar return to Arendt can be found in George Baird's *Space of Appearance* (2003), where he posits that a reformulated conception of contemporary public would see a 'new citizen' as some "yet undefined hybrid...as characterized by Arendt and the flâneur so familiar from Benjamin...beginning with a reexamination of the phenomenon of action in all its complex historical nuances." (345)
- 6 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.
- 7 Ibid, 199.
- 8 Craig J. Calhoun, "Chapter 9 – Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces" in Craig J. Calhoun and John McGowan (ed.). *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics. Contradictions of Modernity; v. Minneapolis*: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 236
- 9 Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes : El Andar Como Práctica Estética = Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2002), 68, 76; Kenneth Coutts-Smith, *Dada*. (London: Studio Vista, 1970),1 ; Simon Ford, *Situationist International : A User's Guide* (London: Black Dog, 2005), 36-37
- 10 <<http://www.newmindspace.com/>>, <<http://improveverywhere.com/>>, < <http://improvintoronto.com/>>
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- 12 "Don't fight for your right for feathers" in Torontoist, March 19 2009 <[http://torontoist.com/2009/03/dont\\_fight\\_for\\_your\\_right\\_for\\_feath.php](http://torontoist.com/2009/03/dont_fight_for_your_right_for_feath.php)> (accessed April 03 2009)
- 13 Martin Buber and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *I and Thou*. A New Translation with a Prologue "I and You" and Notes by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 88-89.
- 14 Jonathan Hill (review), "Sliding/Folding/Swing Door by Atelier FCJZ." *AA Files* 36 (1998), 64.
- 15 Liane Lefaivre, Aldo van Eyck, and Alexander Tzonis. *Aldo Van Eyck : Humanist Rebel : Inbetweening in a Postwar World* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 113.
- 16 Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 44. Hill equally positions Humanist, polyvalent form as somewhere between a reactive and creative user.



- 17 This concept of 'supports' capable of being adapted within a larger frame derives from John Habraken and the 'SAR' writing in the early to mid 1970 on new strategies for inhabitant appropriation and reconfiguration, or 'infill' of mass housing. N. J. Habraken, *Variations: The Systematic Design of Supports* (Cambridge, Mass.: Laboratory of Architecture and Planning at MIT, 1976); N. J. Habraken, *Supports : An Alternative to Mass Housing* (London: Architectural Press, 1972).
- 18 Nils Norman, *Pockets of Disorder: The History of Adventure Playgrounds*. Retrieved from [http://www.cityprojects.org/cityprojects\\_content.php?id=167&i=14](http://www.cityprojects.org/cityprojects_content.php?id=167&i=14)
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 This interpretation aligns itself with Bakhtin's definition of dialogism in literature
- 21 Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users*, 198.
- 22 Linda Lee (ed). *Young Architects 9: Proof. Young Architects* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press: Architectural League of New York, 2008), 21.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 <<http://www.rebargroup.org/projects/parking/>> (accessed October 2007)
- 25 <<http://www.streetsareforpeople.org>> (accessed October 2007)
- 26 <<http://www.urbanrepublic.ca/about.htm>> (accessed November 2008)
- 27 Ian Chodikoff, "Parking Projections" in *Canadian Architect*, October 2008 digital archive <<http://www.cdnarchitect.com/issues/ISarticle.asp?aid=1000225043>> (accessed November 2008)
- 28 based on artists' description <<http://www.urbanrepublic.ca/drive.htm#>> (accessed November 2008)
- 29 <<http://www.cdnarchitect.com/issues/ISarticle.asp?aid=1000225043>> (accessed November 2008)
- 30 Information acquired in correspondence with the architect, June 9 2009.
- 31 Folke Köbberling and Martin Kaltwasser, *Ressource Stadt - City as a Resource: One Man's Trash is another Man's Treasure* (Berlin: Jovis, 2006), 15.
- 32 Jeff Squires, "Building 'Blind Spots' for the New Urban Environment" in, PSFK.com, posted Feb 04 2009 <<http://www.psfk.com/2009/02/building-blind-spots-for-the-new-urban-environment.html>> (accessed May 28 2009)
- 33 Recettas Urbanas web site < <http://www.recetasurbanas.net/index.php?idioma=ENG&ID=0002>>
- 34 Jane Rendell, "Site-writing: Critical Spatial Practice" (2006) <[arteleku.net/4.1/zehar/6061/Rendell\\_en.pdf](http://arteleku.net/4.1/zehar/6061/Rendell_en.pdf)> (accessed Feb 2008 and June 01 2009).
- 35 <<http://moleculararchitecture.blogspot.com/search/label/1%20PROJECT%20STATEMENT>>
- 36 <<http://www.urbantactics.org/projects/ecobox/ecobox.html>>
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## 8.0 URBAN[ITE] - URBAN[IST]

Today...society is becoming more and more controlled and surveyed. Every space needs to be defined with an initial purpose. So if you do something different from its initial purpose, it is almost a crime. It is all to make the environment safer. However, this way of making the environment safer is also making the environment weaker to unexpected accidents. It is better to have redundancy in public space.<sup>1</sup>

YOSHIHARU TSUKAMOTO [Atelier Bow-Wow]

*"If I could do this again, I would design a public space — a Big City public space — and let them claim it....I think the skaters would just take it over."*

HOWARD DAVIES [Atelier Big City]



*fig 8.1    Playing cricket along the Jane and  
Finch Hydro corridor*

The theoretical and field research conducted for this thesis between September 2007 and June 2009 reexamined definitions and critiques of public space and action. Taking a stand on the limitations of some of these critiques, it set out to better understand the role of *spaces of hidden appearance* — often blind to most professionals. The discussion of these informal spaces and actions seemed a more constructive means of overcoming the negative circuitous dialogue on the current state of the public realm. The resulting assemblage exposed an array of nuanced relationships and experiences for which the constructed urban landscape (often inadvertently) provides. *Spaces of hidden appearance* — the urban gaps, thresholds, deprogrammed infrastructures and containers — possess within them the possibility of informal temporary reclamation. This thesis claims that these creative reclamations are the product of active informal publics searching for alternative, informal ways of inhabiting the city outside the privacy of the home.

In undertaking the research, both international and local projects were explored. However the more developed cases of each action were to be found in Toronto. This is the case for a number of reasons. Toronto presents a convergence of several historical, physical, social and cultural conditions that both attract and deter informal public uses. The city has been shaped by a complex and evolving set of urban plans, formalized visions and regulations since its ten-square grid was first surveyed in 1793.<sup>3</sup> Much like other major North American cities, these have evolved and adapted over time. The cases bear witness to a moment in time for the city of Toronto — revealing fragments of these urban dynamics as they are

either emergent or in another evolving stage. They are anything but static, and should not be treated as such.

Due to the evolution of Toronto's physical urban fabric, a number of spaces ripe for appropriation have arisen. These spaces also reveal myriad different historical layers of the city. The spaces are sometimes left purposefully. The generous sidewalks along Spadina Avenue, for example, are abnormally wide compared to most other Toronto main streets. At other times, these spaces are formed somewhat accidentally. The gap where 'Swing Site' was speaks to the evolution of Toronto's land divisions. It is one of many residual 'quirks' left over from this evolving process. The pool and its adjacent tower bear witness to a shift in Modernist design strategies in the city.<sup>4</sup> Constructed in the 1970s, this 'tower in the park' with a pool and tennis court was conceived as an ideal and progressive alternative to the single-family homes that make up much of Toronto's older fabric. Many of the Toronto Parkour practitioners tend to gravitate towards buildings in and around the downtown built at this same time. These are but a few of the many urban in-betweens that exist in this city. These spaces may not be as plentiful or as vast in Toronto as they are in other cities, but they are present nonetheless.

In addition to urban form, diverse heterogeneous publics and their migrations across the city are also steadily increasing. With these varied publics come social and cultural uses of space most often unanticipated by design. Within this diversity, many like-minded individuals seem to have found a common

bond through play, exchange and cultivation, among other urban practices. For some, this can be attributed to the widening gap between haves and have-nots, providing an informal step into public and economic participation.<sup>5</sup> For others these are active displays of potential resistance, sought out and created by a young, active, ‘digitally savvy’ public searching for meaning in a public realm ever more carefully contrived and packaged for consumption.<sup>6</sup>

Fundamentally, though, Toronto provided accessible grounds for first-hand encounter and repeated observation over time — a necessary factor in the methods of study developed over the course of this thesis. In theory, these methods could be further undertaken elsewhere, and that is ultimately one of the intentions of future research in this field.

What makes Toronto a particularly poignant case city for this author is how it resides in between familiarity and alterity. I have been a resident of the Greater Toronto Area on and off for most of my 27 years. Before the research was undertaken, the spaces explored and public actors encountered resided in a blind spot of my own understanding of Toronto. As an urbanite, taking a closer look has undoubtedly expanded my own ability to understand and contribute to the *production of space* across these urban fields. I want to participate, trespass, appropriate and actively engage my city anew.

As an urbanist, however — or in any other professional design capacity — these explorations have arrived at no steadfast rules or conclusions to impart upon design. This may in part be due to the author’s interpretation, but I believe



it is more fundamentally due to the nature of these spaces. It is the claim of this thesis that the sustained existence of a blind field, by definition, requires it to remain at least somewhat in a state of obscurity. Bringing what was once blind into focus exposes it, inevitably jeopardizing its current state.

For example, the increased exposure of the ‘Secret Swing’ eventually led to its demise. Operating for almost two years as a semi-private property, its overexposure led to its eventual complete removal and spatial enclosure.

New York’s Highline project, on the other hand, demonstrates another answer to this exposure. It was a *space of hidden appearance* ripe for redevelopment that was transformed into a space of very visible appearance. As a number of the informal activities that first appropriated the space since the 1980s are sacrificed<sup>7</sup> for a ‘broader public good,’ only time will tell if the new design will provide gaps for future reappropriation to unfold.

Somewhere in between we find the countless appropriated New York community gardens. While some were eventually torn down and redeveloped into residential and commercial building sites, others were maintained due to the perseverance of many in acquiring land rights and seeking out partnerships with public authorities and organizations.<sup>8</sup> Their social valuation and meaningful community appropriation played no small part in this fact. To this day, though, many remain tenuous, and in a constant struggle for their *right to the city*.<sup>9</sup>

As well, the tactical and mobile nature of many operational blind fields just leads to their displacement, rather than their erasure. Blindness — in the

eye's perception as well as the city's — is subjective and in a perpetually dynamic and shifting state.

When determined illicit gardeners are pushed out of a space, they will often find another one to reclaim — usually less visible or more blighted. Many informal vendors will do the same, or reclaim at another time of day where they won't be hassled. And a *Parkour's* fluid mobility often leads him or her to see displacement as an opportunity for new encounter rather than a loss. All three of these actions gain and lose actors based on factors outside spatial ones — such as YouTube's ability to make *Parkour's* popularity soar from obscurity to popular culture, or the aging and eventual abandonment of street vending by its older constituents.

What arises in a comparison of all the cases of *play*, *exchange* and *cultivation* explored across Toronto and in other cities is that architecture's agency in contributing to the blind field remains paradoxical. It lies not in their design; if anything, design thwarts and transforms the blind field, bringing it into plain sight. Neither does it lie in their preservation; their temporality and dynamism renders this a futile cause. Fundamentally, design is a formal and strategic undertaking. To assume otherwise wouldn't do justice to its professional practice, or the many creative publics who participate in its subversion.

However, the thesis posits that the active creative appropriations of *play*, *exchange* and *cultivation* that do occur in urban blind fields can serve to enrich emerging architectural praxes. *Critical spatial practices* point to a number

of ways in which conventional architectural space, time, material and design sovereignty can begin to be questioned, subverted or expanded by design. While some subvert conventional architectural form, others find temporary ways of making a space public and a social asset to a community. Others still — such as AAA's Ecobox and the Blackwell/U of T mobile community kitchen — seem to reconsider of all these factors.

The many expanded practices reveal contributions that design might offer to a city's spaces of hidden — and not-so-hidden — appearance. Architecture can find ways of providing a greater urban generosity of incomplete and obscured spaces, in addition to open and closed ones. Architecture can mine and revalue materials and sweat equity latent within a project's repertoire of space and participants, for example. Urban temporal gaps can be identified and begin to integrate different cycles of inhabitation. Finally, architecture can find ways more meaningful than token to include end users in its processes. All these would ideally contribute a set of spatial, material, temporal and participatory frameworks which would hopefully catalyze user appropriation — or at least provide a meaningful dialogue with it.

In conclusion, crucial to this author's claims is that the most important contribution that architects and other design professionals can make to the blind field is sensitivity to their very existence. The expansion of architectural praxes does not in turn reveal a strategy for designing blind fields. The blind field cannot be designed by architects, because its authorship is not reducible to architecture

alone — the lack of design intention is fundamental the concept's definition. The blind field is not a product of any one space, material or participant. Simultaneously, it also bears the traces of larger, intangible dynamic forces — economic, social and cultural alike. Instead, it is in the confluence and disjuncture between all of these, over time and set against questions of spatial ownership, that the blind field truly emerges. While for many it will continue to remain in the shadows, for this author it is under these terms that they should be valued and celebrated as vibrant and necessary parts of any meaningful public realm.

\* \* \* \* \*



## Endnotes

- 1 Mason White, Interview with Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, "Atelier Bow-Wow: Tokyo Anatomy." *Architect* (22 May 2007): [http://www.architect.com/features/article.php?id=56468\\_0\\_23\\_0\\_C](http://www.architect.com/features/article.php?id=56468_0_23_0_C) (accessed September 21 2008)
- 2 David Theodore, "Making Place: A Montreal Skate Park." *Canadian Architect*, v.35, no.10 (October 2008), 37.
- 3 See plan of York Harbour by Alexander Aitkin, 1793 (city of Toronto Archives)
- 4 John Sewell, *Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 32.
- 5 Michel S. Laguerre, *Informal City* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 161.
- 6 A wave of such literature was released about 10 years ago and has been on the rise since. Titles include: Engwight, *Street Reclaiming* (1999), Klein, *No Logo* (2000), Reynolds, *On Guerrilla Gardening* (2008), Todd & Scordelis (Improv Everywhere), *Causing a Scene* (2009)
- 7 The Highline's web site outlines a list of rules which exclude a number of play, exchange and cultivation practices outright or without the necessary permits < <http://www.thehighline.org/>> (accessed June 09 2009)
- 8 Tom Fox, Ian Koeppel and Susan Kellam, *Struggle for Space: The Greening of New York City, 1970-1984* (New York, N.Y: Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, 1985), 77.
- 9 Malve von Hassell, *Struggle for Eden : Community Gardens in New York City* (Westport, Conn. ; London: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), 9.





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